

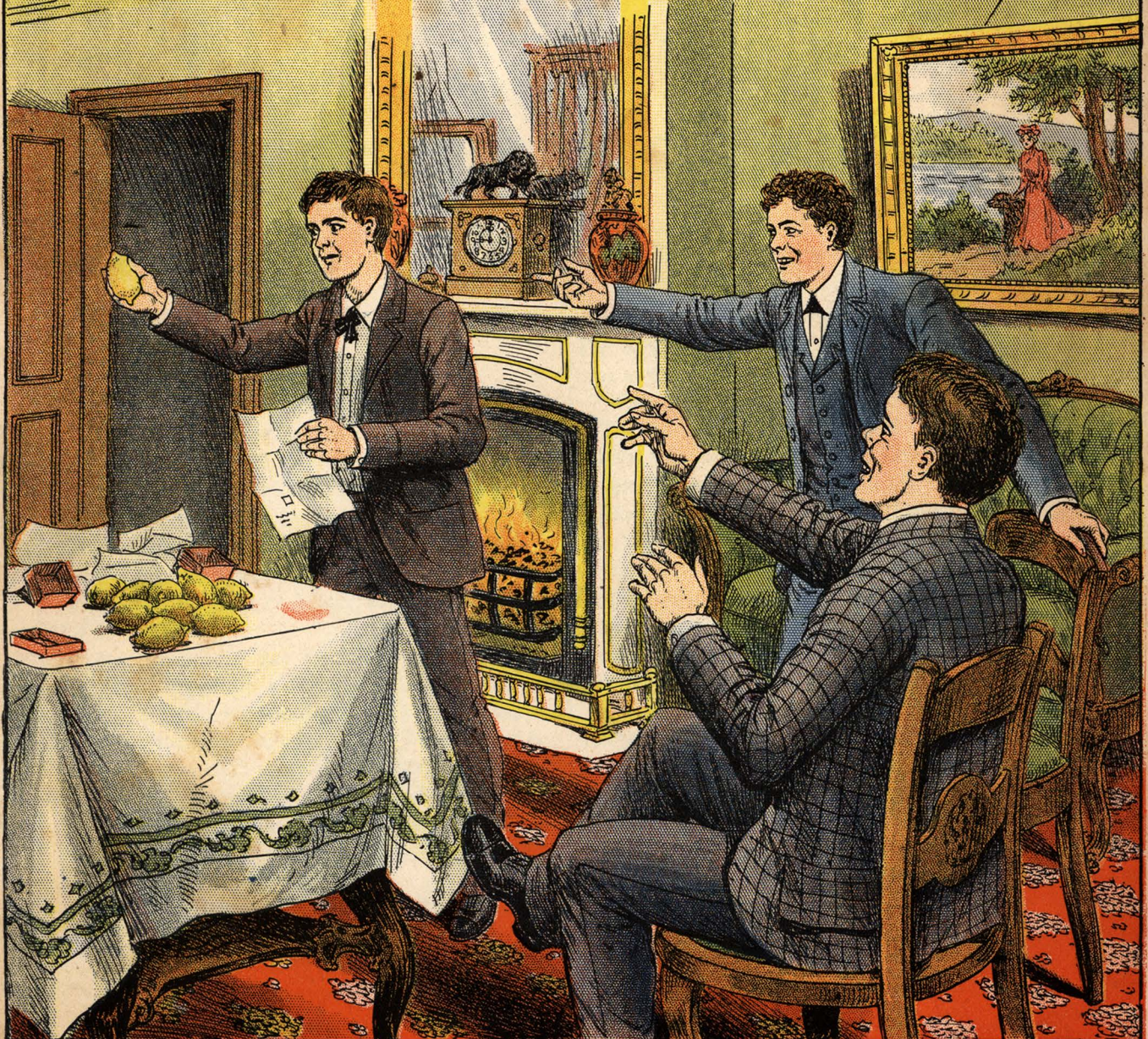
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WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY**. EVERY WEEK.

A LEMON FOR HIS;
OR, NAT'S CORNER IN GOLD BRICKS. *By EDWARD N. FOX.*



"I send you the best there is in life for you," Nat read from Jessie's letter. With a throb he opened the dainty parcel, drawing forth---another lemon. Dock and Tib roared with laughter, but Nat's eyes flashed forth a new fire.

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A LEMON FOR HIS

OR,

NAT'S CORNER IN GOLD BRICKS

By EDWARD N. FOX

CHAPTER I.

THE CHAMPION DREAMER.

"How did you ever come to pick up such a funny little mutt?" asked Tib Freeman, lazily.

Dock Hayes laughed lightly, then his face grew more serious as he replied:

"Hold on there, Tib! Nat may be green, but he's no mutt. He's a long way from being a mutt or a fool."

"He's the biggest dreamer I ever saw, anyway," commented Tib, obstinately.

"Well, Dad says there are two kinds of dreamers," argued Dock. "One kind never does do anything but dream. But the other kind wakes up once in a while, and puts his dream through. That's true of some of the biggest inventors, some of the men who've made the greatest sudden piles in the money market; Columbus was a dreamer, but he discovered the other half of the world."

"And you think your boy marvel is going to do something of the sort, do you?"

"I'm interested in seeing what he can do," evaded Dock.

"Humph!" quoth Tib. "You must be—to bring such a queer fellow into your home. I'll bet it's the first time in his life that that youngster ever stepped on an Axminster carpet."

"Oh, that's very likely," agreed Dock. "I guess Abe Lincoln got grown-up before he got in for much luxury."

"This wonderful Nat has never been anywhere, has he?"

"He hasn't seen much of the world," Dock agreed. "But I'm betting money that he'll change all that in the next year or two."

"Humph!"

Tib would have been surprised if anyone had told him that he was jealous of this very new Nat Furman.

But Tib was a bit jealous, for two reasons.

Dock was not only one of the "best-fixed" boys in Creston, but he was by long odds the most popular.

Dock's father owned one of the biggest stores in this hustling young city of some forty thousand inhabitants.

Dock himself was a fine-looking fellow, always well-dressed, and usually with considerable money shoved down into one of his pockets.

But nothing could spoil Dock Hayes. He liked almost everyone he met, though he had a certain shrewd way of judging people and holding his tongue about his opinions of them.

He was good-natured, energetic and always ready to go out of his way to do another a good turn.

Tib's second reason for not liking Nat any too well was on account of Jessie, Dr. Crane's very pretty young daughter.

Tib had been sweet there for a year past.

Now, Nat had come to town a fortnight before, as the guest of Dock Hayes.

Within three days Nat had met pretty, saucy Jess, and had made up his mind that she suited him.

That being the case, our green young hero immediately

decided that she must be his sweetheart. He accordingly laid close siege.

Of course, as even Tib knew, Jessie's sudden liking for Nat was all because of her sense of humor.

She, like Tib, must have discovered that Nat was "the funniest little hayseed—though Jess would have found a more polished way of expressing it.

And so, finding a lot of fun in the study of Nat, she encouraged him to call.

Three times lately Tib had called at Dr. Crane's house, only to find Nat already there.

Nor did Nat seem to be able to discover any reason why he should hurry away on the arrival of Tib.

Worse than that, Jessie had gone out with our hero twice—once to church, and once to a party.

Dock, who understood pretty closely what lay in Tib's mind, was wise enough to say nothing.

"How on earth did you come to get acquainted with Nat Furman, anyway?" demanded Tib, after a pause, as they sat in the handsome morning room in the luxurious Hayes house.

"Why, Dad and I went over to the Auto Show. Dad had some notion of buying a machine. Hanged if we didn't find Nat there, swelling around with a card which proclaimed that he was salesman for the Nonesuch. Somehow, that youngster got acquainted with me inside of five minutes. Next thing I knew he had it out of me that Dad was in for buying a machine. That settled it. Nat walked us over to the Nonesuch enclosure. Dreamer? Say, that youngster knows something about machinery! He knew his own machine, hanged if he didn't, and he knew the weak points in all the other machines. He just hung on to us for the rest of the evening. In the morning he was on our trail again. Dad took a great liking to Nat; said he had the enthusiasm and the conviction that makes the world move. Well, sir, by noon, Dad owned a Nonesuch—and it has proved a mighty good car so far."

"But why did you bring the fellow home with you?" persisted Tib.

"Why, I took such a liking to him. And Dad did, too."

"And so Nat came here to live here on you, and stopped rustling for an auto house?"

"Nat came here for a little while because he lost his position," Dock retorted, almost stiffly.

"Couldn't sell any more machines, eh?"

"He sold three in that week, and his commissions as sub-agent ran up to over two hundred dollars."

"Then why didn't he stick to the business?"

"Fellow he worked for was too much of a snide," retorted Dock. "As soon as Nat wanted to draw some of his commission money on account the agent told him to go to blazes."

"Couldn't he force the agent to pay?" questioned Tib.

"Of course not. Nat's a minor, isn't he? Under age, and can't sue for what's owed him. It isn't the first time that Nat has been up against that game, either. He's been shifting for himself for a year, now. He has earned plenty

of money, too, but somehow there's always a gold brick in it, and he doesn't get what's coming to him."

"It's what he gets for trying to be smarter than other boys of his age," replied Tib, disgruntled.

"Hush! He's coming now."

A rather brisk step sounded in the hall-way, then Nat Furman stuck his head a bit into the room, saw Tib, and inquired:

"Engaged, Dock?"

"No," answered the boy host. "Come right in, Nat."

So Nat entered.

He was just a little taller than the average boy of seventeen, somewhat narrow of chest, and a trifle inclined to stooping shoulders.

Every time he remembered those shoulders he tried to stand up straighter.

He was none too well dressed; in fact, compared with Dock and Tib, he looked shabby.

He looked, too, sometimes, as if he were aware of this fact, and as if the knowledge hurt him.

His hair was brown and straight; somehow, it looked half lifeless.

His eyes were a light brown. More than half the time he seemed to be studying or thinking of something, and hardly seemed to see people or things.

But, when he looked straight at you, those honest brown eyes won you. They made you think that you were talking to a wholly honest human being who would scorn any kind of deceit.

A good nature that seldom or never got ruffled, and a mind that was free from ugly thoughts about others—these qualities shone in Nat's eyes.

Now, in the early winter afternoon, with his hands rather blue and cold, Nat stepped over to the grate fire, standing there with his back and hands to the blaze.

"Been busy, old fellow?" Dock asked, kindly.

"Not so busy this morning. Just walking and thinking," Nat replied. "But last night I got off a hustle of a mail. I hope nobody in the house heard me when I stole downstairs, at half-past one, and made my way to the post-office."

"Answering 'boy-wanted' advertisements?" suggested Tib, half-ironically.

"What do you mean?" inquired Nat, mildly.

"Looking for a job as boy in some store or office?" Tib explained.

"No," Nat replied, promptly. "I don't want such a job. A boy in an office gets three or four dollars a week. I want something that pays man's wages."

"And you expect to get it?" asked Tib, half-pityingly.

"Yes," Nat answered, simply.

"Some new scheme on, Nat?" Dock broke in.

"Ye-es. You see, fellows, it takes some brains in these days for a fellow to find out something that a smart, capable boy can make man's pay at."

"Indeed it does," Tib agreed, with a smile.

"I've been doing a heap of thinking lately," Nat went on.

"Dreaming, you mean, don't you?" suggested Tib. "You strike me as being the champion boy dreamer of the world."

"Perhaps I am," Nat assented, without offense.

"What's your general idea of getting man's wages at seventeen?" broke in Dock, kindly.

"Did I say wages?" questioned Nat, somewhat surprised.

"I didn't mean that. I meant a man's income—a man's chance to get comfortably rich!"

"How can a four-dollar-a-week kid do that?" Tib wanted to know.

Nat pulled up an arm-chair close to the fire, faced both of his companions, and went on, quietly:

"I don't believe, Tib, I ever told you much about my life, and what I've noticed in the few years that I've been on earth. In the first place, my mother died when I was three years old. As Dad never married again he and I were thrown together a good deal. I had a good chance to study his mistakes in life."

"Mistakes?" muttered Tib. "You're sure an easy critic of your father. His mistakes."

"Well, he made some," Nat insisted. "My Dad was one of the smartest men in his class at college. He came out trained to be a chemist, and he got a job at one of the oil-fields in Pennsylvania. It doesn't matter how little Dad went to work for at first. But, as the years went by, he became head chemist for the big coal oil concern that grew up on those fields."

"A head chemist ought to get big pay," observed Tib.

"So you'd think. But Dad didn't. The biggest pay he ever got was fifteen hundred a year. He was one of the first to discover all the different by-products that can be obtained from coal oil. Paraffin is only one of the valuable things.

"Well, Dad went on discovering more and more things that could be extracted from coal oil. His discoveries fairly made that coal oil company buzz in business. Yet he always worked for a small salary, though it was his brains that made the big, growing business possible.

"While Dad was getting fifteen hundred a year, what do you suppose the owners paid their general manager? Thirty thousand dollars a year! And the advertising agent got eighteen thousand!"

"Yet it was your Dad who had the brains that made it possible to supply the goods?" murmured Tib.

"Yes; now, you see where the difference came in. Dad had the brains and a bunch of 'em. The general manager and the advertising agent didn't have a quarter as much brains, but they knew just how to go about it to sell the goods.

"Lots of men have the brains to make the finest goods, but they don't know how to make the public want or buy the goods after they've been made. Now, it's no use for anyone to have the best goods in the world, if he can't sell them. Do you see?"

"So the two men at the head of the company got paid according to what they could sell?" broke in Dock.

"They did, and they'd have had their pay doubled if they could have sold twice as much of the goods as they did."

"But what would have happened if your father had suddenly come to know twice as much as he did?" hinted Tib.

"He'd have been fired for knowing too much," pursued Nat, drily. "So it happened that he went along, toiling all through life, and never making much money. He couldn't afford to send me off anywhere to school, and couldn't look forward to putting me through college. I just had to grow up in that backwoods Pennsylvania town, with all the rough folks of the oil regions.

"Of course I've never had such a heap of education, and no doubt I'm as green as grass," Nat went on, honestly. "But at least I had a chance to look around me and see what ailed things. If I never found out anything else I found out, anyway, that the man who walks away with the bank-roll is the man who knows how to sell something better than anyone else can do. So that's what I'm out for—to sell!"

"And you've been at it a year?" asked Tib.

"I've been trying to get at it for a year," Nat corrected, thoughtfully. "Two or three times I've made fairly good efforts, and have earned some good bunches of money, but somebody always cheated me out of the most of it."

"You've got a knack for buying gold-bricks, eh?" insinuated Tib Freeman.

"So far I've been doing that," Nat assented, readily. "But I'll get over it, as I know more. And, one of these days I'll show that I'm the real, genuine goods at the game of selling. In fact, I think I'm the real, genuine goods at the game of selling. In fact, I think I've struck the two-six-and-a-quarter gait now."

"The new business that kept you up late last night?" hinted Dock.

"Yes."

There was a pause. Neither of Nat Furman's hearers felt quite at liberty to ask this earnest, if dreaming, youngster just what his new business was.

"It struck me a few days ago," Nat went on, almost sleepily, "that, if you want to sell something for big profit, the best way is to sell the thing that most everyone wants."

"That sounds correct," murmured Dock, surveying the ceiling of that comfortable room through half-closed eyes.

"What is it that most people want?" pursued Nat.

"The earth!" grinned Tib.

"You've struck it right the first time!" laughed Nat, bringing his hands together with a snap. "That's what I'm going to do!"

"What?"

"Sell the earth!"

"Eh?" queried Dock sharply, sitting up and staring at his friend, while Tib found himself gaping at "the mutt."

"I'm going to sell the earth," Nat went on, coolly. "That's the new game. Of course, I expect to sell only

small bits of the earth. Bits of real estate, you know. Here's the whole earth, divided up into so many building and farming lots. A man buys one of these lots, but he's always ready to sell again if he can get a good enough price. Hence, in every state there is a big crop of real estate agents. This little city of forty thousand people has twenty-eight real estate agents, and I've gone to the trouble of finding out that seven of them are making a decent living, and that three of that seven have even got rich at the trick. So me for the real estate game, for I believe that to be one game that a boy can play as well as a grown man."

"You've got your nerve with you," grunted Tib.

"Not nerve at all," corrected Nat, good-naturedly. "Now, see here, what do owners of real estate want to do? Sell it, of course. They don't care who sells it for them. They'd just as soon pay me for selling it as anyone else. Now, fellows, you can take it as straight that there's a chance waiting, in every progressive town in the country, for any boy who is wide awake enough to make people want and buy real estate."

"Where are you going to open your office?" smiled Tib.

"That's one of my troubles," Nat admitted, regretfully. "I haven't got money enough to start an office. But I spent my last money in having some circulars printed that I've sent to all the real estate agents in town. The circular explains that I'm ready to sell any property on their books, and to do all the planning, thinking, scheming, hustling, in return for half the commission of selling for them. I've sent a letter with every circular."

"And you think the real estate agents are going to divide their profits with you?" queried Tib, aghast.

"They'll be glad to, when they find that I can sell property that they haven't been able to sell," spoke Nat, confidently.

"Oh, this boy is certainly the star dreamer of the universe!" murmured doubting Tib to himself.

"I hope to hear from some of the agents soon," Nat went on. "I've asked 'em to furnish me with lists of the properties they have to sell, with maps, and all such information. I have asked them to make appointments for me to see 'em and explain my ideas. Fellows, I tell you, I'm in the real business, at last—selling the earth, in small chunks. And it's a game any boy can go into and win out with, if he has the hustle."

Tib smiled in a superior sort of way, but Dock sat looking quietly at his young friend, wondering just how much there was in this dreamer's scheme.

They heard the door-bell ring, then the parlor-maid came to the door, saying:

"A young man just left this package and letter for Mr. Nathaniel Furman."

"Why, it's from Pawlow, the real estate man," cried Nat, springing forward. "My first answer to my letters and circulars, fellows!"

Nat tried to look cool, but he was inwardly throbbing

with excitement as he placed the rather bulky package on the table and started to tear the end off the envelope.

"Real estate maps in the package, I suppose," he said, as he pulled the letter from the envelope.

CHAPTER II.

THE FRUIT MAN DOES A RUSH BUSINESS.

Dock looked on eagerly, in friendly interest.

Tib, though he wouldn't have admitted it, was waiting breathlessly.

Nat, candid Nat, without any effort at secrecy, read the letter from Pawlow:

"Dear Sir: Yours, with enclosure, received. Your scheme is clear and concise. In a word it's a winner."

"Hear that!" broke in Dock, delightedly. "And Pawlow is one of the shrewdest real estate men in this part of the country!"

Tib said nothing. Nat read the brief conclusion of the letter:

"In token of my appreciation of your brilliant scheme, I beg to hand you the enclosure in the package accompanying this note."

Nat's head was a trifle higher, his chest just a bit more out. There was a glad, pleased, almost proud look in his eyes as the letter-head fluttered from his hands to the table-top.

"Now, we'll see what's in the package!"

The young dreamer's voice rang gladly as he drew out his pocketknife and cut the string.

He came, first of all, to a pasteboard box.

"There's a lot of wrapping on it, whatever it is," he announced, as he unrolled length after length of paper. "And it's something small and round, too, whatever it is. I wonder what?"

Then the last thickness of paper came off from around the object.

At sight of it Tib emitted a howl, then fell forward on his face on the carpet, where he rolled, choking with laughter.

Nat, looking intensely puzzled and bewildered, held in one hand—a ripe, sound, golden, handsome lemon!

Dock didn't want to laugh, but for the life of him he couldn't help slapping his thigh and roaring.

"Wow! Oh, dear! Wow!" howled Tib, from the floor.

That look on Nat's face, a look of utter inability to understand, was the funniest part of it all.

Dock got another look at that face, and fell back in his chair, laughing until he grew purple in the face.

"Now, what can Mr. Pawlow mean by that?" queried Nat, wonderingly.

That brought another chorus of shrieks from the two better informed youths.

"Why don't you know?" Dock murmured, chokingly.

"No, I don't."

"Why, the lemon is the fruit of the dotty tree," explained Tib, as soon as he could find his voice.

"The dotty tree?" Nat asked, wonderingly. "I never heard of it."

By an effort Dock Hayes got his face straight. Then he started to explain:

"Nat, passing the lemon is the way that a fellow takes of telling you that you have rats in your belfry."

That made it worse. Young Furman looked absolutely bewildered.

"It means," Tib added, solemnly, "that one-half of your brain isn't there, and that the other half of your brain is sick."

"It's a way people have of telling you that you're a chump—a phantom-chaser, a moonbeam-hunter," Dock put in.

"In plain English," queried Nat, "is it a way of telling me that I'm a fool?"

Both boys nodded their heads.

Young Furman flushed.

"It's an impudent way, then, of making fun of me? An insult?"

He looked so hurt that Dock made haste to break in with:

"Oh, no, old chap! It's simply a humorous way of being called down."

Nat looked just a shade relieved.

"It's one way of telling me, then," he asked, "that Pawlow doesn't think anything of my scheme?"

"Exactly," Dock agreed.

"Couldn't Pawlow have found a more gentlemanly way of expressing himself?"

"Oh, don't be so sensitive, Nat," Dock Hayes remonstrated. "It's only a joke, you know. Why, in the last few weeks I've had enough lemons passed to me by friends to stock a fruit stand with."

By degrees they made the green youngster understand just what "passing the lemon" meant.

The bell rang again. The parlor-maid, coming to the door of the room, her face wreathed in smiles, passed Nat another lemon.

To a string tied around the fruit was a card bearing another real estate broker's name.

Tib smiled again, but Dock hinted, gravely:

"You see, Nat, what a common custom it is in these days to pass a lemon."

"Another man who makes fun of my scheme," sighed the young dreamer.

And there was a third in evidence mighty soon. It came in the shape of a lemon wrapped in a small bale of tissue paper, the whole accompanied by the card of a real estate man.

Then they began to arrive fast—so fast, in fact, that Dock suggested that soon he'd have to help the parlor-maid answer the bell.

Some lemons came bare, with a card tied to the fruit. Others came in packages more or less elaborate.

Several were accompanied by letters more or less funny.

"The fruit man is doing a rush business to-day," uttered Nat, smiling, but with a rueful face.

"They're overdoing the trick," grumbled Dock, who began to feel decidedly sorry for his green young friend.

"I can see what has happened," hinted Tib. "You know the real estate men have a couple of rooms in Smith's Block that they call the Real Estate Exchange. When they got together this morning they discussed Nat's plan and agreed upon the trick of each sending him a lemon."

"Then all the real estate men have clubbed together to——"

"To club your scheme to death!" put in Tib, teasingly, upon which Dock shot him a threatening look.

Nat took out a pencil and paper, and quietly began copying the names from the cards and letters.

"What's that, now?" Hayes wanted to know.

"My black-list."

"What's that for?"

"I'm marking down the names of the real estate men that I won't have anything to do with," Nat responded.

"Or that won't have anything to do with you," Tib suggested, whereupon he got another black look from Dock.

"Same thing," Nat rejoined, calmly. "Cause and effect."

"Wait a little while," urged Tib, "and you can write down together the names of all the real estate men in town."

Nat bent over to scan a letter, which gave Dock a chance to bend fiercely.

"Tib," he whispered, "if you don't shut up, I'm going to thump you! Do you want to discourage the poor fellow altogether? Suppose you hadn't a soul in the world and had to hustle for yourself, how would you feel?"

"What's that?" asked Nat, looking around unsuspectingly.

"Oh, nothing," replied Dock, drily. "I was only suggesting to Tib that it might be a good idea for us to go outside and get a little exercise."

"Exercise in the fresh air is always good," nodded Nat, and went on writing.

Jangle! went the bell.

"Another real estate man heard from," trembled on the tip of Tib's tongue, but he didn't speak, for Dock's blood-thirsty eye was upon him.

Again the parlor-maid came to the door, holding out a letter and a small, dainty-looking package.

"For Mr. Nat," she announced, trying hard not to laugh right out.

"This is a refreshing change," murmured the boy aloud, his eyes lighting as he scanned the handwriting on package and envelope.

"Why?" asked Dock.

Nat flushed a bit shyly, before he went on:

"When I was sending out the letters last night I sent one of my circulars to Miss Crane, and a letter explaining my new move. I knew she'd be interested in what I'm doing. I asked her what she thought of my scheme. I knew she'd write me, and I'm glad she did, for, honestly, fellows, I need some cheering after all this guying."

He looked uncertainly from package to letter and back again.

Next he broke the string on the package, but then, almost trembling, and alternately white and red, he broke the seal on the envelope, and drew forth the enclosed sheet.

"Can we hear?" asked Tib, green with jealousy, but trying hard to hide the fact.

Our hero nodded as he unfolded the sheet.

"I send you the best there is in life for you!" Nat read from Jessie's letter.

With a throb he opened the dainty parcel, drawing forth—another lemon!

Dock and Tib roared with laughter, but Nat's eyes flashed forth a new fire.

"Perhaps, some day, she'll know what a friend is worth!" spoke the young dreamer, grimly.

Dock suddenly ceased the laughter that had come to his lips.

Then, as quickly, he rose and crossed the room, slapping Nat on the shoulder.

"You can be sure she will, old chap! And, if she doesn't, she's not worth worrying about!"

"Don't say that!" begged Nat.

"Gracious! That fellow won't even get mad or take a hint when a girl turns him down," quivered Tib Freeman, inwardly. "Why, I suppose he'll have the cheek to call on her to-night. Maybe he'll gather up all those lemons and take them to her for a peace-offering!"

Nat sank slowly down into a chair, studying the blazing coals in the grate.

Tib, rising and stretching, remarked that he guessed that he'd be going, nor did Dock urge him to stay.

"Don't take this business of to-day too seriously, old fellow," Dock urged, gently.

"What? Oh, the lemons? Oh, that page is turned over and closed already," Nat muttered.

Again the doorbell rang. Dock went himself, this time, to stave off any more lemons.

But, instead, he came back with a sealed telegraph envelope.

"Excuse me," said Nat, politely, then broke the seal and read.

In a moment he looked up, with just the gleam of a twinkle in his eyes.

"I guess I'm not wholly a fool, Dock," he said, quietly.

"Why, I don't believe you're any part of a fool. Neither does Dad," Dock protested, warmly.

"Then what does ail me?"

"You've lived in that backwoods oil town all your life, and you're just a bit green—that's all," Dock assured him.

"Greenness wears off, doesn't it?"

"In your case I'll bet it does mighty soon!"

"Maybe folks will believe, before long, that I ain't so very green, either. At least, I believe I'm on a good stroke."

"Something in that telegram?" hinted Dock.

"Yes, and I'm going to tell you, for you don't treat me

as if I were a lunatic. You know the Hemmenway tract, on the edge of the town?"

"Yes; a mighty valuable piece of property."

"Well, I'm trying to find a customer to buy that tract."

"You?"

"Yes, Dock. The other day I saw in the newspaper an advertisement calling for offers for a forty-acre tract for manufacturing purposes. The concern that advertised is the one that puts up Limene, a temperance drink that is selling like blazes in these days. Now, when a big concern is manufacturing a beverage, that concern needs to know all about the water supply on its tract. There's a good spring, one that can't be exhausted, on the Hemmenway land. So I got a jug, filled it full of water, and wrote a letter saying that I had such land to dispose of, and added that I was sending a sample of spring water from the land in question for their chemist to test. I knew that much from my own father being a chemist."

"Well?" asked Dock, wonderingly.

"Here's the answer," and Nat passed the telegram over. Dock read:

"Ship ten hogsheads of water, our expense, for testing on large, practical scale. LIMENE COMPANY."

"What does it mean?" asked Dock.

"Mean?" blazed Nat, as he rose and began to pace the room. "Why, it means that the chemist for the Limene people has found that the water is just what they want for putting up their beverage for the market. It means that, if I'm half way clever, I can sell this tract for the owner and fill my pocket with a large, fat commission."

"But you've got to get authority from the owner to act as his selling agent?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

"And you've got to have a little cash to buy and fill your hogsheads."

"I suppose so."

"You'd trust my father?"

"I'd trust him as quick as I would you, Dock!" spoke Nat, in a tone that was full of warmth.

"Then, come along," cried Hayes, reaching for his hat.

"Where to, Dock?"

"To the store to have a talk with my father behind closed doors! Maybe in another fortnight, Nat Furman, folks won't laugh at you as much as they have done!"

CHAPTER III.

HEADLONG INTO DANGER.

Many people who met Nat for the first time were inclined to think that he was either asleep or wild in his head, according to the mood in which they found him.

The truth was that our hero was woefully green. Beyond that not much could be said against him.

Four days brought about a great change in him and in his affairs.

In the meantime he had made the acquaintance of Aaron Hemmenway, the owner of the forty-acre tract of land on which the spring was located.

Carroll Hayes, the rich merchant of Creston, had introduced the boy, which made a great difference in young Furman's reception by the owner of the real estate in question.

Nat had cautiously stated that he thought he had a buyer for the Hemmenway tract.

At that Aaron Hemmenway pricked up his ears and wanted details.

"I don't believe I'll supply the details until we've agreed on the terms that I'm to have if I bring about a sale for you," Nat replied, gravely.

"Oh, you bring me a customer and I'll see that you are used right," protested Hemmenway.

"What the boy wants," interposed Carroll Hayes, gravely, "is a contract, an agreement, that covers his commission in case he brings you people who will buy your land."

"But I can't make a contract with a minor," protested Hemmenway, shrewdly. "And it wouldn't be any good if I did."

"But you can make the contract with me as the boy's trustee," hinted Mr. Hayes.

And that was done, for Hemmenway was anxious to sell his valuable tract of land, if it could be done.

Nat promptly shipped his hogsheads of water, as requested, and awaited the answer.

It came. John Haslett, the manager of the Limene Company, would be out on the 2.30 train to meet our hero and the owner, to inspect the land and talk over terms.

"But you can hardly meet the manager of a rich company in such clothes as those," argued Hemmenway, glancing over Nat's rather shabby, out-of-date attire.

"They're the best I've got," Nat admitted, ruefully.

"Then I'll have to take a chance and stake you to an up-to-date outfit," Hemmenway observed.

That was done. Nat was "built over" from head to toe, in the store of the livest clothier in Creston.

In addition a small roll of bills was tucked away in one of his pockets.

"Don't throw the money away," suggested middle-aged Mr. Hemmenway, cautiously. "But you may have to spend a little in entertaining the Limene people while they are here."

To cap it all, Nat was provided with a stylish carriage, drawn by a spanking team of horses, with which to meet his people at the depot.

Aaron Hemmenway was to be there, too, though he was not to appear too openly at the depot.

As soon as Nat and the Limene manager left the depot in a carriage, Hemmenway was to jump on his bicycle and hurry on to his office, there to meet Manager Haslett.

Nat reached the depot at a little after two o'clock, so eager was he to be on time.

Outwardly, he looked half asleep, but that was only on the surface.

Inwardly, he was trembling and quivering.

"Whee! Wouldn't it be great if I pushed this sale through!" he throbbed, under his breath.

One great fascination of the real estate business is that the agent often wins his fattest fees through mere chance, or, at the most, by the exercise of a little brains.

Often he has only to bring seller and buyer together. These two talk over their own terms, but if a trade is made the real estate agent receives his commission just the same—and all for merely having brought seller and buyer together!

In this case Nat had seen an advertisement for a factory site.

He also knew that Hemmenway wanted badly to sell his valuable tract.

In addition, Nat knew that a chemical company, in choosing a site on which to manufacture a beverage, is largely governed by the character of the water on the land.

One concern may want a tract on which there are springs of soft water. Another concern may have to have hard spring water.

One concern may want water in which there is much iron; to another concern the fact of there being iron in the water would be a bar to buying the land.

And so on. But the spring water on the Hemmenway tract appeared to just suit the Limene people.

"It seems like a fairy story," Nat chattered to himself, as he waited. "Oh, I hope it comes true! What an easy way to make money. After all, real estate is the game for a boy, if he can keep himself wide awake and be on the move all the time. Why, if this thing goes through, I can be one of the big depositors at the bank."

"Who's that stylish-looking young fellow on the platform?" asked Jessie Crane, as she strolled near, one hand resting lightly on Tib's arm. "He looks familiar to me."

"So he does," agreed Tib. "Why, it's——"

"Nat Furman!" cried Jessie, in amazement.

"The human lemon-squeezer!"

Jessie laughed merrily.

"But what a difference good clothes do make in him," went on the girl.

"Rather!" agreed Tib, jealously. "They make his awkwardness look all the more pronounced."

"Oh, I'm not so sure of that," argued Jessie Crane. "I think he carries good clothes rather well."

"Guess he's getting ready to leave town," suggested Tib, hopefully, for he didn't care much about listening to praise of Nat, who might, at any minute, become a rival again.

"Let's go over and speak to him," suggested Jessie.

"Aw, what's the use?" demanded Tib Freeman.

"I'm curious."

"To know where he got the clothes?"

"No," pouted Miss Crane. "I'm curious to know whether he's going away for long."

As Jess had dropped his arm and had started toward the depot platform, Tib had no choice but to follow her or give up the victory to "the champion boy dreamer."

Nat's face didn't light up much as he saw Jess coming toward him, but he lifted his hat and greeted her politely.

"Going away for a while?" Jessie inquired, while Tib looked hopefully at the other boy.

"Oh, no," smiled Nat.

Then, as Jessie continued to look at him questioningly, he added:

"I'm waiting for some one who's coming on the 2.30 train."

"Some people on business?" queried Tib, half laughingly, half sneeringly.

"Yes," Nat answered simply.

"What handsome horses!" cried Jess, suddenly, noticing the team of handsome bays.

"It's the team that I'm using to meet the people with," Nat explained, coolly.

"Oh!" said Jess, but now her voice rang more with interest than with mere curiosity.

"Got a job at last?" demanded Tib, whose jealousy was booming up to the boiling point.

"Oh, no," came the reply from the young dreamer. "At least, not exactly. I'm in business for myself."

"It must pay!" Tib uttered, looking hard at the spanking horses.

"I think it is going to," Nat replied. "At least, I hope so."

Tib wanted to stroll along, but Jessie didn't. So Tib stayed.

But even Jessie resented the fact that Nat Furman, though he was wonderfully polite, did not volunteer more information about his present business.

As the three young people stood there chatting, a man drove up in an automobile.

Behind, hooked on by a chain, was a second automobile, not under its own power, but being towed, while a man sat in this second machine to steer.

Slowly the leading automobile towed the other one around to a spot by the freight sheds.

Then the first machine, after being uncoupled, came gliding back.

Behind it clanked the towing chain, rattling over the frozen ground.

"That fellow doesn't keep his head about him," grumbled Tib.

But the driver of the machine halted close to the depot platform to speak to an acquaintance who hailed him.

From the conversation that followed it soon appeared that the man in the auto was quite deaf.

"Tell him about his chain," whispered Jessie.

"What's the use?" demanded Tib. "He'd hand me a lemon, or want to, for being too fresh. He'd ask me if I didn't suppose he knew that his chain was trailing."

But Jess hardly heard, for she had turned to talk to Nat.

"It seems that I'm only a handy third party to have around to run errands and be pleasant," growled Tib, savagely, to himself.

The poor fellow was becoming more jealous every minute.

"What can she see in that fellow Furman, just because he happens to have passably good clothes on?" Tib wondered, gloomily.

Truth to tell, Jessie was feeling secretly a good deal ashamed of having sent that lemon to the young dreamer.

She wanted to show him, now, that the prank had not been caused by any real contempt on her part.

But Nat, still sensitive over the matter, took great pains to be very polite and not a bit too cordial.

"You haven't been to see me lately," challenged Jess.

"I've been so extremely busy," Nat explained, coolly.

Jess pouted.

"When you've nothing else in the world to do I suppose you'll call?" Jess, tossing back her head, demanded.

"That's very kind of you," he murmured, coolly.

Jess began to feel more than half offended. She was beginning to realize that this sleepy-looking boy was more clever than he looked.

"Well, so long!" roared the deaf man in the automobile.

He gave a wrench at the lever, a twist at the heel, and turned off, at almost instant high speed and turning nearly at right angles.

Whizz! clank! The sudden start yanked that chain around.

The hook at the end caught snugly around Jessie's ankle.

Uttering a shriek, she fell, ere any one could interfere.

"Stop!" yelled the horror-struck onlookers, but the deaf automobilist heard not a word, but jammed on the speed.

"Tib! Help!" screamed Jess.

One foot foremost, she was dragged up the street, unable to free herself.

But at the first glimpse, almost before the first cry, Nat Furman threw himself forward.

He barely caught at the chain with both hands. But he held on.

Whirling, whizzing, pounding on the hard ground, he hung desperately on, allowing himself to be dragged, buffeted, pounded on with helpless Jessie Crane!

Not a word of all the shrieks could the deaf man at the lever hear!

CHAPTER IV.

TOYING WITH DEATH!

Thump!

Bump!

Crash!

"Oh, Tib, save me!" screamed Jessie.

"She thinks it's Tib!" flashed, resentfully, through Nat's mind.

They had been dragged a hundred and fifty feet in two seconds or so.

Yet that brief, twinkling space of time was enough for young Furman to see what must be done—the only thing that could be done!

He held grimly to the chain, not caring if his own life was pounded out in the strain.

He had the chain some four feet above where Jessie's ankle was caught.

Now, as the machine gave a sudden bump backward, in passing over a rough part in the road, Jess was yanked forward toward the boy.

In that twinkling instant, holding to one part of the chain, Nat profited by the slack part at the end.

Twist! Jerk! He freed Jessie's ankle like a flash.

She lay in the street, dazed but motionless now.

As Nat was jerked forward at fearful speed he saw her lying there.

Then he had the presence of mind to let go of the chain.

At the same time he had the great good luck to escape having the heavy hook strike him in the face as it went by.

But his face got its punishment just the same.

He fell heavily, his face ploughing up the frozen ground.

"Safe! The worst is over!" throbbed the boy.

He got up, aching and trembling, but hurried wobblingly, toward the girl.

"Jessie! Miss Crane, I mean! How badly are you hurt?"

She looked up at him in a dazed way, then burst into a torrent of tears.

"You—you nearly killed yourself!" she sobbed.

"Not quite," protested Nat, drily. "And you're safe."

"You're all right!" cheered Tib, darting up and offering his hand to help the girl to rise.

But Jess drew away from him.

"I'd rather have the same help that I've been having," she retorted, half angrily.

Nat, without a word, offered his hand to help her rise.

Jessie faced Tib, flaringly.

"You couldn't hear when I called you!" she cried, her voice ringing with contempt.

Then, again, her voice broke down in sobs as Nat helped her toward the depot platform.

They were greeted with cheers by the thirty or forty people who had hastily gathered.

"My, my, boy, but you're the gritty one!" cried one man, admiringly. "And quick? A cat couldn't beat the way you leaped after that girl! My, but it took grit, though. I almost shut my eyes, for I was certain you'd both be killed!"

"Of course it took grit," faltered Jessie, soberly. "Mr. Furman, I don't know how to thank you now, and I'm not going to try to. But when I'm more myself I'll try to tell you what I think of your splendid act. I owe it to you that I'm alive."

"Let me help you home, Jessie," suggested Tib, meekly. "Shall I get a carriage?"

"Wait and I'll talk to you by and by," returned Jessie, coldly.

"Really, Jessie, I tried to save you. But I was too far away, and——"

But Jessie turned impatiently away from luckless Tib Freeman.

She looked pityingly at Nat.

Truly, the boy was a sad-looking figure.

His new clothes had been torn to shreds—almost. Had they been torn any more than they were young Furman would have needed a barrel to get inside of.

His elbows and knees, his hips, too, were battered and bruised. They ached so that he could hardly stand up.

As for his late neat derby hat, that had been pounded to a wreck while he was being dragged over the ground.

Added to that, his nose was now bleeding freely, while he had one nasty-looking cut on his forehead and another on one cheek.

Altogether, he was a ragged, battered, torn, bruised and bloody wreck of a boy.

But his bones were still whole, and so were Jess Crane's. That was all he thought of for the moment.

So absorbed were all the people on the platform that no one noticed the arrival of the express particularly.

The train, making a brief stop, pulled out again.

Then a puzzled voice was heard demanding, loudly:

"Is Mr. Nathaniel Furman here?"

"Yes; here I am," cried Nat, starting forward.

Aaron Hemmenway, standing in the background, gasped shiveringly:

"My Lord! what a villainous-looking agent to meet the buyers for my land!"

With a bound forward, Mr. Hemmenway pushed Nat back a step or two, eyeing the stranger and murmuring:

"Furman has met with an accident. If you're Mr. Haslett, I'll take the young man's place."

But one of the bystanders hastily broke in with a few words of what had happened.

Mr. Haslett, who was a tall and rather distinguished-looking man past middle age, looked Nat over attentively.

Then Jessie broke in with her own grateful account of how her life had been saved.

"I'll take pleasure in showing you over the land, while Furman gets away and tidies himself," broke in Hemmenway, anxiously.

"Thank you, Mr. Hemmenway," retorted Haslett. "But I've rather a weakness for the doers of heroic deeds. I take it that young Mr. Furman will want time to wash away the blood that he so splendidly sacrificed, and that he'll want to get into other clothes. So I'll wait, for I assure you that no one except Furman can show me the tract I've come to look at."

Then the manager of the Limene Company drew forward a traveling companion whom he introduced as Mr. Dolli-
ver, the company's mechanical engineer.

Nat showed the visitors into the carriage. Hemmenway got in with them.

The owner of the land tried to engage the Limene people in conversation, but Mr. Haslett quickly showed that he preferred talking with the boy.

Tib, in the meantime, coaxed Jessie into one of the depot cabs and took her home, for her torn dress was hardly suitable for promenading.

A stop was made at one of the stores.

Within twenty minutes Nat, looking much more presentable, again at Hemmenway's expense, came out and re-entered the carriage.

The party was driven out to the tract in question, which lay close to the railroad track.

Mr. Haslett expressed himself as being rather well pleased with the looks and location of the land.

"What first attracted us to your land, Mr. Hemmenway," Haslett explained, "was that first sample of water from the spring. You see, we have to be decidedly careful about the water we use in our plant. In fact, I may say that we probably wouldn't have given another thought to this tract if it hadn't been that you directed young Furman to send us a jugful of the water for our chemist to test."

Hemmenway looked a trifle sheepish under Haslett's keen eyes.

"Oh, it wasn't your thought, then, but the youngster's?" queried Haslett at once. "Young Furman, my opinion of you is going up every minute. If we should buy this tract of land, then you may be sure that it was you who brought the sale about."

"You see how much room there is for a freight siding, and all that sort of thing," urged Aaron Hemmenway.

"Yes." But Haslett turned and went on talking with the boy.

Hemmenway sensibly decided that if the land could be sold it made little difference who brought the sale about.

So he did not begrudge Nat his sudden favor in the eyes of the manager of the Limene Company.

"I think my people are going to like this tract fairly well," said Mr. Haslett, as the party turned back to the carriage. "Mr. Hemmenway, you can send us on a map of the land, and we'll correspond about the price and that sort of thing. Make the price low enough, and there's some chance that we can put the deal through."

When it came to parting at the depot, both Haslett and Dolliver paid more attention to our hero than they did to the owner of the land.

"Even if we don't close for the land, Furman, I shall hope to hear from you again," declared Mr. Haslett, pressing the boy's hand at the parting.

In the evening Nat paid a call of politeness on Jessie Crane.

He found Tib there, too, that youngster looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"Tib doesn't seem to think that you did so much today," suggested Jessie.

"I didn't," Nat admitted, quickly.

"But you did it right on time, and you risked your life like a soldier!" cried Jess, admiringly.

"I'd have done it if I could," muttered Tib, sheepishly. "But how could I?"

"Are you asking me?" questioned Nat, as Freeman's eyes met his.

"Why, yes."

"What you need," Nat answered, quickly, "is a little more head. That is, a head that can think quicker. You were as close to the chain and Miss Crane as I was."

He felt that he owed Freeman this thrust for all the merciless guying that the other boy had sprung on him days before.

"Can you stay and spend the evening?" asked Jessie, sweetly.

"Very kind of you, Miss Jessie," Nat murmured.

"And you'll stay?"

"Unfortunately——"

"Now, don't begin that way!" cried the girl, poutingly.

"But it is unfortunate," Nat rejoined, very coolly. "I have several letters to write to-night. I'm hustling in business you know. Good-night, Tib. Good-night, Miss Crane. Sorry I can't stay."

Nat bowed himself out.

He wasn't quite ready to forget the lemon the girl had sent him.

CHAPTER V.

THE TRICK OF THE RIVAL REAL ESTATE MAN.

Then matters dragged for many days.

Nat, in his first venture in real estate transactions, learned how long it takes to put a big deal through.

There was haggling over the price, for one thing.

Fortunately, all this time, Nat had a hospitable home with the Hayes family.

They had confidence in his ability to win out if he had a little show.

During these days of delay, Nat, who began to feel that he had some genius for selling real estate, began to look more thoroughly into the other properties in and around Creston that were for sale.

Winter weather had set in. There was ice on the ponds, and snow on the ground.

Thanks to the quick sale of one small building lot, Nat gathered in commission enough to buy himself an overcoat.

But still success was a long while in coming.

Many of the people whose acquaintance he had made felt their first impression—that he was a dreamer—to be the right one.

One cold evening, just as he was leaving the house for a walk before supper, Nat received a letter from the postman.

"From the Limene people, eh?" he thrilled to himself, and stood under the corner gaslight to read it.

"We are sorry to keep you waiting so long for our decision," wrote Mr. Haslett. "Apart from other considerations, we have recently received samples of spring water from another tract of land. Much as we liked the water from the Hemmenway tract, we are bound to say that we like the new sample of water much better. We shall be obliged, therefore, to delay our answer to you for the present."

"Got a sample of water they like better, and from another

place, eh?" muttered Nat, as he walked along, feeling a curious sinking at the heart. "Then my fat commission isn't so likely to pan out? Oh, dear! But I wonder if Haslett is only bluffing, to get a knock-down on the price? Haslett seemed a mighty nice fellow. Still, he may have his own ideas about the way to succeed in business. I wonder whether it's a bluff or a real throw-down?"

The more Nat thought about it the more his head throbbed with anxiety.

"I reckon I'd better take a good, brisk walk, and clear my head," he murmured. "I need a clear head to deal with this disappointment."

He walked for some distance. He reached the outskirts of the little city, and found himself down in a section where cheap boarding houses for foreign laborers stood.

There was nothing inviting about this section. Nat, in the act of turning a corner, had decided to strike back for home and supper.

But, in turning the corner, he caught swift sight of another of the city's real estate men.

This one was William Joll—"Big Bill Joll" he was often called.

Joll was a man of large frame, with a good deal of unnecessary fat added.

He was large, bloated and red-faced, with narrow eyes that had a cunning look in them.

Yet Nat would hardly have heeded the fellow, or the man with him, had he not heard his own name spoken.

"Scamp," chuckled the real estate man, "I reckon we're going to have that sleepy kid, Furman, beaten to a standstill."

"Oh, you are?" muttered Nat, dodging back around the corner. "What's up, I wonder?"

The individual addressed as Scamp chuckled, while Joll continued:

"For awhile the lad was chesty. I guess he thought he was going to show us older hands at the game just how it ought to be played. It seems he caught the Limene people by sending them a sample of water from the spring on the Hemmenway tract. But the Limene people have found out that they like a whole lot better the sample that I sent 'em."

"Which said sample you had a chemist fix up for you," chuckled the fellow addressed as Scamp.

"Yes; I set a chemist at work to find out what it was that the Limene people liked most in their water. Then I had him fix a sample. I've got an appointment with Haslett to go and look at my tract with me."

"But if he draws a big sample of the water on your tract?" hinted Scamp. "He might decide to rake up some of that water for himself."

"That's just where you and Rags Abbott come in, Scamp," laughed Joll. "I've got a whole barrel of the stuff fixed and ready to dump in that spring. On the day that Haslett comes out for a look I want you to dump that barrellful into the spring half an hour before we're due."

"So that's the game, is it?" chuckled the boy, who felt suddenly very much alive over this important discovery. "I've heard of salting a mine and selling it. But this fellow Joll is going to salt a spring. That's why the sale was going to be taken away from Hemmenway and myself! Gracious! But I'm glad I took this walk and heard this talk! Whee! But I'll have a yarn for Haslett's ear!"

In his jubilation Nat would have turned and fled.

But at that instant Joll's companion turned around the corner, match in hand, to light his pipe out of the wind.

"Whatcher doin' here, kid?" demanded Scamp, suspiciously.

"What kid?" blazed Joll, darting around the corner.

There his eyes fell upon Nat. How those mean little eyes of the big man bulged over their discovery.

"You, Furman?" mouth Joll, turning purple in the face.

"Yes, me," mocked Nat, drily.

"Playing the spy, eh?"

"On what?" asked the boy.

"A-listening to me, eh?"

"I heard what you were saying," Nat assented.

Joll swore.

"Going to blab, I s'pose?"

"I've got a right to tell folks what I hear other people talking about, haven't I?" jeered Nat.

But Joll, instead of answering, made a sudden sign to Scamp.

That rascal, while Furman's attention was centered on Joll, leaped behind our hero, seizing him around the throat.

Gasp! Gurgles!

Scamp had enormous strength, which he did not despise to use just now.

He ran swiftly down a darkened street with the boy, Joll following, pantingly.

At last, at a whistle from the real estate man, Scamp halted, still gripping the boy so that he could not speak.

Out in this strip of the suburbs the road was dark and lonely.

The only buildings anywhere near were the somewhat distant boarding houses.

The foreign laborers who dwelt there, even if they heard sounds of trouble, were not at all likely to mix in.

"You gotter remember I'm no sprinter," panted Joll, as he caught up.

"That's so," nodded Scamp. "Now, see here, Bill Joll, you tipped me the signal to abscond with this kid. What's the next play in the game?"

Big Bill Joll looked at his honest young rival in business with a puzzled air.

"Blest if I know, Scamp."

"Ye'll have to make up yer mind, boss."

"The only thing I'm sure of is that I want this youngster kept out of the way for the next few days—say for a fortnight."

"I can fix that," promised Scamp. "I know just the place to hide him and keep him quiet."

"Near here?"

"Near enough."

"Can you smuggle the kid to the place without getting copped?"

"Sure, unless I have the luck of a geezer," promised Scamp, slangily.

"All right, then. You don't need any help?"

"Nary bit."

But it was certainly up to Scamp to reconsider.

For the last minute he had let up on the clutch at Nat's throat, contenting himself by holding the boy by one arm.

All of a sudden Nat doubled his arm, then shoved his elbow forcibly into Scamp's wind.

It was a telling blow. The fellow doubled up for an instant, letting go of his young captive.

"Here, stop that!" puffed Joll, angrily.

But Nat, profiting by his instant's freedom, was off like a shot, racing straight for those despised boarding houses.

Scamp, too, after an instant spent in regaining his wind, was off, keen on the chase.

Joll, aghast, but not speedy, brought up a distant rear.

As he ran, Scamp caught sight of a cudgel lying on the snow, a cart-stake that had fallen from some passing truck vehicle.

Just long enough to snatch up this bludgeon, Scamp stopped and bent.

Then, straightening up again, he darted on in the pursuit at increased speed.

Nat, glancing backward over his shoulder, saw that the fellow was gaining on him.

"I don't want any more of his style," throbbed the boy, alive with terror, for he believed that Scamp wouldn't hesitate to beat out his brains.

"Help!" shouted Nat Furman, as he neared the corner at which he had first come upon this pair. "Help! help!"

Then he darted around the corner.

As he did so he almost collided against a blue coat, inside of which was a big, husky-looking policeman.

Nat just darted aside—to make room for Scamp, who ran plump into the cop.

"What's this?" roared the cop.

"Grab him!" appealed Nat.

Scamp dropped his buldgeon, but too late, for the policeman had seen it.

"What's all this up?" gruffly demanded the cop, as he folded his big arms around Scamp.

The latter struggled, until he saw the policeman reaching for his club.

"Hold on to him, officer!" begged Nat.

"What's he been doing to you?"

"He tried to kill me with that club."

"Lie!" growled Scamp.

"I'll hold you, anyway," grumbled the officer, letting go with one hand, but holding Scamp tightly with the other while he flourished his locust. "The station-house is the place to spin yarns in. Come along there, both of you."

"Wait a second," begged Nat.

"What's loose?"

"Joll is," answered Nat, drily. "Big Bill Joll. Do you know him, officer?"

"The real estate man?"

"That's the one."

"What did he do to you, kid?"

"It was Joll who set this thug on me."

"Never heard of Joll being in any such business as that," protested the policeman.

"He was to-night, though."

Nat had darted around the corner, hoping to catch sight of Bill Joll.

But that rascally rival, hearing what was happening before he reached the scene, had wisely halted, then faded.

He was nowhere in sight, now, as Nat was forced to admit after looking.

"One bird at a time," grunted the policeman. "Come along, kid, so you can make your complaint."

There being a suburban police station, a small affair, close at hand, Scamp, who gave his other name as Heffers, was soon booked.

Within fifteen minutes Nat was free to hurry back to the hospitable Hayes roof for his supper.

But on turning a corner into Main Street he bumped into Bill Joll.

"Oh, hullo!" greeted Nat, smilingly.

"Huh!" retorted Joll, uneasily.

"You faded out in the rural districts."

"Huh!"

"Too bad we didn't catch you," mimicked Nat. "We got your friend all right, though. He's in a cell, doing a lot of thinking."

"Huh!"

"Maybe you'll be doing some thinking to-morrow, too," predicted Nat, smilingly.

"Huh! Whatcher mean?"

"Well, from the way your friend acted, I reckon he's getting about ready to squeal on you. It'll upset your real estate swindle, and very likely land you in jail into the bargain."

"Don't you try none of that!" warned Joll, sudden menace shining in his narrow eyes.

"I shan't try anything that isn't square, anyway," agreed Nat. "If you hadn't, either, you might not find jail and ruin facing you right now. Good night!"

He walked on, leaving Joll to stare after him in utter rage.

"Jail and ruin, eh?" pulsed the big fellow, his face purpling and his fat sides shaking. "We'll see about that! But I wonder if Scamp will peach to save his own skin? If he does—wow! Things might look better for you, Bill Joll!"

The white tinge of fear crept into the big fellow's face as he watched our hero walking briskly down the lighted street.

"You're likely to be just one too many in the world for me, kid!" muttered the big fellow.

He glared until he saw Nat turn a corner.
 "And now to see what we can do about it!" quavered Bill Joll, as he half crawled, half staggered away, his face a sickly greenish hue under the street lamp.

CHAPTER VI.

"GOOD FOR WHAT AILS YOU!"

That evening was not very old when a strange thing happened out in that police station in the suburbs.

The sergeant in command sat all alone at the desk, his single house-man having gone to a restaurant, an eighth of a mile away.

A rough-looking fellow entered, bearing a bouquet of most handsome flowers.

"Hey, you're in the wrong house!" grinned the sergeant. "There ain't going to be any wedding here."

"The wedding I'm talking about," grinned the rough-looking stranger, "happened 'bout five years ago."

"What wedding?"

"Have you got a gentleman here named Heffers?"

"We've got a thug, a yegg, a hobo, answering to that name," replied the sergeant.

"That's him."

"What about him?"

"His wife sent these posies."

"Heffers's wife?" derided the sergeant. "Stop your kidding!"

"I'm talking right," nodded the rough-looking one. "Heffers's wife. He's got one, and she's a beaut. Real beauty, I mean. And she's long on credit with the dry goods stores, too. My, what a swell dresser Mrs. Heffers is!"

"Oh, g'wan!" ordered the sergeant. "What would Heffers be doing with such a wife?"

"Well, he's got her, anyway," declared the stranger. "You wouldn't think it to look at Scamp. But he was a smarter feller five years ago. And his wife, though she don't like his hoboing, hasn't thrown him down altogether. Once in a while, when he talks of bracing up, she takes him on her hands again, rigs him up and puts some money in his pockets. Mrs. Heffers heard that her man had been pinched again to-night, so she sent me here to hand him these posies and to say that she'll be on hand in the morning, with a good lawyer."

"Whatcher giving us?" insisted the police sergeant, eyeing his visitor keenly.

"Well, I've got this bo-kay to back up my string with, hain't I?" demanded the stranger, calmly.

"Certainly a fine bouquet."

"Any objections to my handing it to Scamp?"

"Why, there's no law against it," confessed the sergeant. "Still, it seems like a shame to chuck away such loveliness on a hobo like Scamp Heffers."

"Come 'round here where you can smell 'em," invited the stranger, amiably.

The sergeant, leaving his desk, stepped out in front of the rail.

He bent over, burying his nose in the fragrant blossoms. Then, suddenly, he reeled.

Chuckling, the stranger pressed a bulb attached to a rubber tube that ran up through the bouquet.

A spray of chloroform dashed into the sergeant's face, down his throat, up his nostrils.

As he fell, dizzily, the stranger leaped upon him, pressing the drugged flowers close to the officer's face.

In a very short twinkling of time that sergeant was past doing immediate business in his line.

Slipping his hand into the sergeant's hip pocket, the stranger drew out the police revolver that he found there.

Then, with a swift bound, he gained the enclosure back of the railing.

The cell-room keys lay there upon the desk.

Snatching them up, the stranger hurried down below, the revolver in his right hand.

"Scamp!" he called, hoarsely.

"Here!" came a voice in answer.

The stranger followed the voice, caught sight of his friend and rapidly began to try the keys.

"Rags!" gasped Scamp, hoarsely. "How on earth did you—"

"No time to talk now," retorted Rags. "Get a hustle on. Talk in the dark woods, under the tall timber. Hike!"

Swiftly the two men quitted the station-house, leaving the sergeant still drugged, and fully ten minutes ere the absent house policeman returned.

But Nat Furman had heard of none of these doings.

The Hayes family having gone out to a theatre, our hero sat alone in the living-room, when the telephone bell in the next room rang.

"Hullo! That Hayes's house?" hailed a voice.

"Yes."

"Young Furman there?"

"You happen to be talking to him now. I'm Furman."

"Good enough! I've got news for you."

"Yes? What?"

"Mr. Haslett is in town."

"Eh? Who are you?"

"I'm with Mr. Haslett. He has run down on the quiet. He wants a talk with you."

"Tell me where to find him, and I'll get Mr. Hemmenway and run around," suggested Nat.

"Hemmenway doesn't come in in this. Mr. Haslett doesn't want to see him."

"Oh!"

"At least not until he has talked with you. He wants a word or two with you before he goes a bit further with Hemmenway. Got that straight?"

"Yes."

"Come on over, then, and see Mr. Haslett at once."

"But where is he?"

"Right here. Oh, I forgot. You don't know where I am."

"Hardly."

"It's just out of town. You know where Adams's road-house is, on the Marathon road?"

"Certainly."

"Well, Mr. Haslett is here for the night."

"I guess I can get over there in twenty minutes or so."

"Good enough. And be sure not to mention it to Hemmenway until you've seen Mr. Haslett."

"I won't," Nat promised.

"Hurry over, then. Good-by."

"Now, what can all this possibly mean?" wondered the boy, as he scribbled a note which stated, merely, that he had gone out.

As he hurried into his overcoat and drew on his mittens he found himself no nearer to having guessed what this strange visit of Haslett could mean.

"And why should he go to that road-house, instead of to one of the better hotels in town?" wondered the boy.

But that point was soon clear.

If Haslett didn't care to meet Hemmenway for the present, he was taking the surest way to avoid him.

"All ready," muttered Nat, looking at the clock, and looking, also, to make sure that he had his latch-key with him.

He stepped out into the keen, cold, brisk winter air, walking rapidly.

"Why Haslett should write me that letter and then follow it right up by coming on the next train is something that I'm curious about," reflected our hero, as he strode along. "But, maybe, that chemist of his has found out that some trick had been played with the sample of water that Joll sent him. My, but won't I have a flea to put into Mr. Haslett's ear!"

Another thought came that made the boy feel brighter.

"If Haslett has taken the trouble to come all the way over to Creston, then he surely hasn't given up the idea of buying our land. Whee! But that commission looms up in all its fatness once more!"

The Marathon road, for which he was headed, was one of the rural roads between two towns.

Had there been more snow on the ground the Marathon road would have been swarming with horses and sleighs at this time of the night.

But the slipping was so poor that Nat, as he walked smartly along to keep himself warm, passed no pleasure vehicles.

Half a mile out from Creston, Nat looked down the road nearly another half mile.

"There's the lights of Adams's place," he murmured.

A little way ahead lay a bridge over a narrow stream.

Beyond, on the left, stood a canvas-topped hay-cock.

Nat walked by this, unsuspecting, until he heard a hurried step.

Turning, he quivered with fright as he beheld two men advancing upon him, and hardly at arm's length away.

Nat turned to run, but it was too late.

As he felt rather than saw them bounding upon him, he turned to fight.

There's a vast difference between being afraid and being a coward!

He struck out, but the two men, coming at once, bore him fairly down to the ground.

"Thought ye had me jugged, did ye?" gritted Scamp, as he struck the boy full in the face.

"Ye bit, anyway, when you got the talk-words over the wire," chuckled the other rascal, as he reached for Nat's wind-pipe.

He took a warning hold, but not a strangling one.

"That telephone message a fake?" throbbed the boy to himself. "Blazes, but I sure was gold-bricked that time!"

While Rags calmly seated himself on the boy's chest, Scamp stood up to see that there were no possible meddlers near.

"We're going to have ye take a little walk with us," confided Rags.

"Oh, of course!" groaned the boy to himself. "Joll wants me out of the way for two or three weeks. And this time is where I go—I have to go!"

"Get up and walk and act decent," advised Rags, helping to get the boy on to his feet, and taking a restraining hold around Nat's arm.

It seemed no use to try to escape, nor yet to shout for help.

The country roundabout was too deserted-looking for any good prospect of aid being within reach of legs or voice.

So Nat, who had summoned his utmost coolness to his aid, sensibly concluded to walk quietly between the two men, who immediately led him across the field in which they had hidden.

"What are you going to do to me?" Nat asked, with all the calmness he could summon.

"Going to do something that'll be good for what ails you," announced Rags, grimly, while Scamp chuckled savagely.

"You've got me guessing," proposed Nat. "What does ail me, anyway?"

"Why, mostly," declared Rags, "you're too fresh, and you have a way of butting into other folks's slick games."

"Meaning Big Bill Joll?"

"Some," grunted Scamp, savagely. "And some because of your getting me pinched to-night."

"You had something to do with that yourself, didn't you?" questioned the boy.

Scamp swore, by way of answer.

"But you haven't told me what you're going to do with me," hinted our hero, turning toward Rags, who appeared to be much the more amiable of the pair of scoundrels.

"Oh, maybe you're going to travel a bit" suggested Rags, drily.

Again Scamp chuckled.

Nor was it a pleasant chuckle to hear, either.

That chuckle had in it little of mirth, but much of the tone of a dire threat.

"Well, I suppose I'll know soon what is going to happen," sighed Nat.

"A bully good guess, kid," approved Rags, evenly.

They were leading him toward the railroad track, in a deserted stretch of the country.

Ahead there loomed up only a tool-shed used by the section gang.

Nat looked about, wondering, as they halted beside this shed.

"Down on the ground for yours," commanded Scamp, gruffly.

Seeing nothing to do but obey, Nat lay down. In silence, but with despatch, his captors bound him at the wrists and ankles.

Then Rags took out a curious-looking bunch of keys. With these he had quickly picked the lock of the tool-shed door.

A tug, and the two men pushed out a hand-car and placed it on the rails of the main track.

Next Nat was lifted, laid on the flat top of the car, and then his captors grimly proceeded to tie him there.

"Joll didn't say anything very definite," grumbled Rags, as they worked at their task. "All he said was that he wanted the kid to be out of the way, sure, or quite some time."

"It'll be a good, long time all right, I reckon," glowered Scamp.

"Careful, or we'll get in the track of a passing train," admonished Nat, anxiously.

"I reckon we will!" grimaced Scamp.

"What's that?" gasped Nat, in sudden alarm. He was beginning to half guess the awful plan.

Toot! Too-oot! sounded a distant, shrill whistle.

"Quick!" muttered Scamp, hoarsely. "We don't happen to want any of this for ourselves."

"You're not going to leave me here in the track of the train?" shrieked young Furman.

"In the track of the express," confirmed Scamp. "Come on, Rags!"

The pair bolted, leaving the boy helpless on the hand-car.

"Come back! Save me! Don't do this!" Nat begged piteously.

But the roar of the night express was the only sound now. It came on, roaring, rattling, cracking, snorting.

Then there was an indescribable roar in the boy's ears.

The engine's great headlight loomed up in front of his terrified eyes.

The flying train was upon him!

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER GOLD-BRICK.

Crash!

Smash!

Bump!

The stationary hand-car was struck full by the engine's cow-catcher.

It swerved, jarred, then left the track.

Slowly it rolled down the slight banking.

In the same instant the slowing express engine came to a full, sudden, hard, jolting stop.

For back on the rails the headlight had shown the engineer a something dark on the track.

At the first startled glimpse it looked to the engineer like a break in the track.

Jam! went the brakes in an instant.

The train began to slow. But a great modern land-flyer, of a dozen cars or more whizzing along at fifty miles an hour, cannot be brought to an instant stop.

The roar that Nat had heard was the release of steam, combined with the straining of the engine and the crunch on sanded rails.

Still going with some force, the engine struck the small hand-car, hurling it from the track.

As the hand-car reached the bottom of the short slope, it turned over on one side.

A moment more, and the train hands were rushing forward.

They found Nat Furman unconscious, blood oozing from a wound in his head.

Then came a physician, who was among the passengers. "Scalp wound," he said. "Let us see if the skull is broken."

His examination seemed to show that it was not.

Nat, of course, in the meantime, had been unbound. Now he rested in a pile of trainmen's coats in the baggage car.

And so he came to.

He looked about him wonderingly at first, while the physician plied him with questions.

In a dazed way Nat told what had happened. Doctor, trainmen and passengers all believed that his mind was wandering.

"But," said the conductor, "we must admit that we found him bound to the car."

"What can you do with him?" asked the doctor, looking up quickly.

"Well, we've got to back into Creston and wire for orders, after this stop. He can go to the Creston Hospital."

Nat's head still troubled him, beyond the pain. He felt more like lying in a half doze.

He had just sense enough to know that he was safe, at last, from Scamp and Rags, and that was all that mattered. So he awoke the next morning in the hospital.

Word was sent to Carroll Hayes and his son, Dock. They came in haste that morning, but were not allowed to see the sufferer.

Toward afternoon Nat rallied. His mind was clearer. He wanted to leave the hospital, but the doctors would not listen to it.

So he spent another night there, but the next day he insisted so strongly on going that, about noon, he was helped to dress.

In the middle of the afternoon he left the hospital behind him, walking slowly away.

As he turned into Main Street the boy's first impulse was to go to Big Bill Joll's office.

He followed that impulse, but it led only to disappointment.

No one but the typewriter girl was there.

"Mr. Joll is out of town," the girl informed him.

"Can you tell me when he will be back?"

"Perhaps not for two or three days."

"He's away, salting' his spring," flashed through the boy's mind.

Thanking the girl, he left the office.

He was going slowly up Main Street when a familiar, cheery voice hailed him from behind.

"Here you, Nat Furman, stop right where you are!"

It was Dock Hayes, who came up beside him, resting a strong and friendly arm around the weak boy.

"How on earth did you escape?" demanded Dock, almost gruffly.

"Why, was I a prisoner?"

"It looks as if you ought to have been," uttered Dock.

"Do you know that you were wobbling just now?"

"Was I?"

"You were. Now, take it easy, and we'll get you to the house as soon as we can, comfortably."

Dock got him to the house at last, helped him to shed hat and overcoat, and then led him into the cosey living room.

Here, down in a chair before the grate fire, Dock plumped him.

"Now, you sit here and doze if you can," ordered Dock.

"I'm going out of the room, but I'll put this bell near you so you can ring if you need anything. Keep quiet and rest."

Nat must have dozed, and dozed quite a bit, for it was dark when he woke up.

It was dark in the room, too, save for the little glow that the open fire threw out.

"You here, Mr. Nat?" questioned the parlor-maid, opening the door.

"Yes, thank goodness!" answered the boy.

"Here's a letter for you, just came."

Nat took the missive, wondering what it could be about.

Then he caught sight of the familiar Limene imprint in the corner of the envelope.

"Hullo, what's up?" cried Dock, coming into the room.

"Just got a letter."

"From whom?"

"It's a business letter, from the Limene people."

"Good news, I hope?" asked Dock, anxiously.

"Don't know. I haven't opened it yet."

Had Dock been in time he would have laid that letter by until the morrow, but now it was too late.

"You want some light, I suppose?" laughed Dock, flaring a match and turning on the gas.

As the blaze illumined the room Nat tore the end off the envelope.

Then he took out the sheet, unfolded, and read.

"What's the matter?" asked Dock, suddenly, for he was secretly watching the boy's face.

"Nothing," Nat muttered, feebly.

"Nothing, eh? Rot!"

"Nothing—much."

"See here, you had no business to have that letter!" cried Dock, angrily.

"I—I suppose I ought to be glad I did get it—at once."

"It's bad news, then?"

"Read it."

Nat passed the sheet to eager Dock, who glanced at the signature of John Haslett.

The main portion of the letter read:

"Owing to changes in the policy of this company we shall not make a change of location for a year at least. Perhaps not even then. We feel it best, therefore, to notify you and ask you to inform the owner of our decision. Under the circumstances we do not, of course, expect you to keep the Hemmenway tract open to our purchase."

"My, but that's too murdering bad!" grunted sympathetic Dock, not knowing what to say.

"That's just what it is," returned Nat. "Murdering! Think of the hopes that are blasted by that letter. Think of the time, the effort, the thought I've put into that land! And now all the huge profit has slipped away from me!"

"Don't let it make you sick, old fellow."

"I'm not going to," flashed the boy. "You don't know me, Dock, if you think that."

He gave Hayes a peculiar smile.

"Cheer up, old fellow. Some one else will buy the tract."

"If they don't, I'll find some one to buy some land somewhere. I've sold one lot since I've been on this scheme, you know."

"And you'll sell a lot more, too, old fellow," cheered Dock, and left him.

"Well, there's one satisfaction in it all," uttered the boy, grimly, when left to himself. "Joll won't profit any by all his rascality. He can't sell to the Limene people, either."

Yet our hero, weak and beaten as he was, could not help feeling gloomy.

Yet how was this poor, green youth to know that the disheartening letter was just another gold-brick.

One can often bribe a poorly paid stenographer and secure a few letter-heads and printed envelopes of a great corporation.

And some people have a knack for forgery.

As Nat lay back in the chair, thinking, a tear trickled down either cheek.

He angrily brushed both wet drops aside.

CHAPTER VIII.

DOING THE GIANT FLOP.

During the next fortnight Nat brought himself back to his old trim.

He began to hustle again, as if nothing had happened.

Somehow, nothing went right.

Yet he did not despair, but kept right on, as if he expected to find a winning around every corner.

Of course he had made his report to the police.

The police authorities, in fact, came after that report.

Now the members of the force, not only in Creston but in other nearby places, were on the lookout for Scamp and Rags.

Nat undertook to tell the police about Big Bill Joll's part in the affair, but as our hero had no proof against Joll the police advised him to "forget it."

Nat had been out all the forenoon, despite the fact that it is difficult to get people to look at land when there is snow on it.

He had hurried home for lunch, and was setting out again, when he encountered Jessie Crane on the sidewalk.

He was about to lift his hat, smile and pass by, when Jessie made it plain that she wanted to speak with him.

She was panting slightly. Her face was flushed and deliciously pretty.

"I've been hurrying along to find you, N—Mr. Furman," she began, almost breathlessly.

"To find me?" questioned the boy, astonished.

"Yes; I've got news for you."

"News?"

"At least I thought it was news, Mr. Furman. You may think that I'm only meddling in your business."

"I'm very sure you wouldn't do that," Nat responded, gallantly.

"I thought you ought to know," Jessie rippled on, then paused.

She waited to see some sign of curiosity in the boy, but was disappointed.

"I don't believe you'd care about knowing, after all," she uttered, disappointedly.

"How can I tell, until I know?" smiled Nat.

But still his face was unruffled by any sign of curiosity.

Green as he was, he knew better than to let every emotion show in his face.

"It's about Joll," began Jess, as if to tease him into curiosity.

"Yes," queried Nat.

"Where do you suppose he's gone?" queried Jess.

"To jail, I hope."

"Well, he hasn't, then," flashed Jess.

"I'm disappointed."

"He's just gone away on the train."

"Yes?"

"To see the Limene people!"

Now, indeed, Nat was interested. But Nat did not betray the fact as fully as the girl had expected.

"Why, I'm greatly obliged, Jess—Miss Crane—for your coming to tell me that. I am interested. May I ask if you know, for certain, that it was the Limene people he went to see?"

"Why, I have his own word for it."

"His own word? How was that?"

"Why, I was at the depot, to send a telegram. I was just inside the door, and he was just outside, talking to his typewriter girl. He said he was going over to see the Limene people, and 'close that deal.'"

"That deal?"

Again Nat Furman jumped, though not outwardly enough for Jessie's rather keen eyes to note the fact.

"And he's gone, you say?" echoed Nat.

"Gone on the last train. I thought you'd like to know."

"And I'm glad you thought so. Thank you, very, very much, Miss Crane."

Jessie was so greatly disappointed that she returned his bow and walked quickly away.

Perhaps, at this moment, she had some notion of just how Nat felt when he received the lemon from her.

But as Nat walked quickly along he felt in his inner coat pocket.

Yes, there was the fateful letter he had received, as he supposed, from the Limene Company.

And there was another letter received at an earlier date.

Nat halted, just beyond a corner, to compare the two signatures of Haslett's name.

"Why, this last signature was a gold-brick—a forgery!" he breathed, fiercely. "Oh, what a fool I was not to guess it sooner. Joll's gold-brick on me! And I took it for the genuine!"

He thrust both the letters back into his pocket.

Then he strode fiercely on, his stride soon growing to a run.

He reached the railway station, almost out of breath.

His hand trembled as he started to write a dispatch.

But he finished it. It was to Haslett, and ran:

"Don't close any deal with Joll until you see me. I suspect he forged your name to letter to me, and I know he has been salting spring on property he tried to sell you. Am coming on next train. Wait for me."

This he sent at once. Then he bought a ticket and waited half an hour.

"Thank goodness Jess heard. And thank goodness she came and told me. I suppose she felt she had to do that much to square up for my getting her out of that auto snarl. Well, she's surely done me a good turn, all right."

Would that infernal train never come?

But it did, two minutes behind time.

Nat was aboard almost as soon as it stopped.

Then he fumed over the stop at every station on the way.

But at last he reached the town where the Limene Company was located.

He did not have money enough to spare for a cab, but asking the direction he started on a jog-trot for the Limene Company's great works.

Before leaving the depot, however, he ascertained that his telegram to Haslett had been delivered.

Nat Furman reached the works almost out of breath.

He inquired the way to the office building, and hastened there.

Just inside the entrance he met a gray-haired man in a uniform.

"Where can I find Mr. Haslett?" he demanded, eagerly.

"Go down this corridor, then turn to the left. You'll find a young man at a desk. Give him your card or your name and he'll see if Mr. Haslett is in."

"I reckon he'll be in, with a vengeance, when he knows what I've got to tell him," breathed Nat, to himself.

Down at the end of the corridor he turned to the left, as directed.

There was the desk, but no young man behind it.

In Nat's way loomed a tall wire gate.

The desk was on the other side of that gate.

Nat tried the handle, but it would not yield.

It would open on the inside, but a brass plate stood in the way of his thrusting his hand in at the catch.

Impatiently Nat waited for a few moments.

Then he ran back to the main corridor to question the old man.

But that individual was no longer in sight.

Back to the gate bounded our hero.

"Where can that young man be?" he groaned.

To call any one who might be within hearing, he beat upon the brass plate with his hands, then shook and rattled the gate.

That very ordinary din failed to produce any one.

"And at this very moment Joll may be finishing that deal," half sobbed the impatient boy. "Good Lord! I wonder if my telegram had any such a job in getting through this gate?"

He called loudly, but there was no response.

"Any one would think this was a holiday here!" uttered the boy, angrily.

Ah! There was a door opening beyond at last.

Haslett and Bill Joll stepped over the sill.

Nat wanted to shout, but he stood there as if petrified.

"Thank you for coming to-day, Mr. Joll," Haslett was saying.

"I guess you're very welcome," grinned the big fellow.

"I hope you're pleased."

"I am," Joll affirmed.

"What over?" quivered Nat. "My telegram, I wonder?"

"I hope you'll find everything satisfactory," Joll went on.

"I haven't a doubt of that," Haslett beamed.

Nat Furman, in that dazing instant, could only listen.

He felt deprived of the power of speech.

His tongue seemed to be sticking in the roof of his mouth.

Ah! Haslett had closed his door and Joll was coming down that inner corridor.

Nat drew back around the corner.

Bill Joll reached the gate, opened the catch, and was about to step through the gateway when something got in his way.

It was young Furman who bumped into him.

Nat pushed the big fellow back, gained the inner cor-

ridor, snapped the gate shut and stood with his back against it.

Just at first Big Bill Joll started to grow pale.

Then all his cheek and impudence came to the surface.

"You kid?" he blustered. "Watcher doing here?"

"You know well enough what I'm doing," panted Nat, his voice sounding hoarse but angry. "I've come here to show you up."

"Show me up?"

"Yes! And stop you from selling that tract of land with the fake, 'salted' spring on it!"

Joll looked a bit startled, then laughed.

"You're talking puzzles, kid," he sneered.

"No, I'm not, you big liar and swindler!" cried Nat, hotly. "I'm talking the truth, and you know it. Mr. Haslett shall know the same thing, too. I'm going to tell him now!"

"Oh, go ahead, then," mocked the fat man, stepping out of the boy's path, with a mocking smile. "Trot right in and tell him. It won't do any harm. Can't do any harm."

"We'll see!" and Nat started toward Mr. Haslett's door.

"I've sold my tract," Joll jeered after the boy. "You've done the giant flop down hill—that's all!"

"I don't believe you."

"And it's all paid for!"

"I've got through with your lies, Bill Joll!" cried Nat Furman, hotly. "I'm going straight to headquarters—to Mr. Haslett himself!"

"Who is using my name?" called a voice.

The door of the general manager's office opened. John Haslett stood on the sill.

"Mr. Haslett," cried Nat, "have you bought a tract of land from this fellow, this scoundrel, Joll?"

"I've just bought some land through Mr. Joll," replied the manager.

"And paid for it?"

"Yes; just paid for it. The deal is settled."

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHALLENGE AND THE BIGGEST BRICK.

Nat fell back, aghast.

"Bought the land and paid for it?" he cried, gaspingly, miserably.

"Yes, the deal is closed, Furman," Haslett replied, in a kindly voice. "At one time I had hoped to buy the Hemmenway tract, through you. But the land Mr. Joll had the selling of proved to have a water much better suited to our purpose."

"That fellow 'salted' the spring!" cried Nat, pointing an accusing finger at Joll, who pretended to look astonished.

"This is a very queer charge to make, Furman," exclaimed Mr. Haslett.

"The boys' out of his head—nutty! Don't you see that, sir?" cried Joll.

"Oh, if you've bought the land and paid for it," broke

in Nat, bitterly, "you won't have to take my word for it, Mr. Haslett. Just as soon as you begin to use that spring for yourself you'll find there isn't the same stuff in the water that your chemist found in the samples. Joll fixed that spring, all right, and you'll find it out when it's too late. You'll see!"

Mr. Haslett looked inquiringly at Joll, and then doubtfully at the boy.

"You can get the money back, if you find that spring has been 'fixed,' can't you?" demanded Nat.

"Why, I—er—er——"

"The spring hasn't been fixed," broke in Joll, shortly.

Nat's lip curled in a scornful smile as he looked at Joll.

"Come into my office, both of you," invited Mr. Haslett, suddenly.

"I've got a train to catch," broke in Big Bill Joll.

"I guess your train can wait a bit—or, at least, you can get another train, can't you, Mr. Joll?" asked the general manager.

"Hardly."

"You are much less accommodating, Mr. Joll, than you were before you had made the sale," said Haslett, half suspiciously.

"It don't make any difference what I am now," cried Joll, cheekily, insolently. "The land is sold, paid for. That's the end of it."

Haslett looked at the fat man with a flash of anger in his eyes.

"Come back into my office, Mr. Joll," spoke the general manager, firmly.

"I won't, then!"

Joll moved as if to pass through the gateway.

"Joll, come back—or you'll be sorry!"

At that ringing voice Joll hesitated.

He looked at Haslett and his gaze fell.

Joll shuffled his feet uncertainly for a moment, then turned and came back toward the office door.

As he neared Nat he gave the boy a look of tigerish hate.

Haslett led them into his office and placed seats for both near his desk.

But both of his callers preferred to remain standing.

"Mr. Joll," spoke Haslett, slowly, "I prefer not to believe this young man's charge."

"That's where your head's level," grinned the fat man, looking relieved.

"Never mind my head, Mr. Joll. That's my own care. I prefer not to believe this young man's story, but I must add that your own behavior in the last minute or two had given me an unpleasant impression of you."

"I'm sorry, then," spoke the fat man, more humbly.

"You can regain your place in my good esteem," went on the general manager, quietly.

"How?"

"I remember that, in the deed, there is no clause concerning the spring on the property. Suppose we revise the deed so that it declares that the spring is a natural one, and has not been tampered with in any way."

"Well?" queried Joll, hoarsely.

"Will you consent to adding such a clause to the deed?"

"No-o," replied the rascal, slowly.

"Why not?"

Haslett's voice rang sharply.

Nat looked on, intensely interested. He felt certain that Haslett was a man who could manage his own affair, if the affair had not gone too far.

"I haven't any authority to put in such a clause," replied Joll, slowly.

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't."

"Then, if we should find that spring didn't hold out, according to the samples of the water that you sent us, couldn't we sue the owner whom you represent?"

"No," replied Joll, with emphasis.

"Why not?"

"Because neither the deed, nor the correspondence, claim that the well will hold out forever."

"Suppose," said Mr. Haslett, sternly, "that we were to notify your owner that we had our suspicions? Suppose we were to notify him that we would sue for the recovery of our money in case we had reason to suppose the spring had been 'fixed' or tampered with?"

"Well?" demanded Joll, defiantly.

"Then don't you suppose that the owner that you represented to-day would decide to hold back your commission on the sale until he found out whether we meant to sue?"

"If he did hold back my commission," cried Bill Joll, angrily, "I'd sue him and the courts would make him pay me."

"You seem to think that you have a pretty smooth case for yourself, Mr. Joll."

"And you, as a business man, know that I have," grinned the fat man.

Mr. Haslett looked a trifle puzzled, as, indeed, he was. But Nat stepped into the breach.

"May I interrupt, Mr. Haslett, just long enough to inquire whether you ever wrote this letter?"

Haslett took the sheet and glanced at it.

"Never!" he cried.

"You are certain, Mr. Haslett?"

"Certain? Of course I am. We have been anxious to move our plant for some time, so why should I write you that we had decided not to? Besides, this signature, though it looks something like mine, is only a clumsy forgery, after all."

"I got that letter in the mail two weeks ago," Nat went on, solemnly, while Bill Joll tried to look as if the present talk did not interest him.

"Then some one forged my name to it for an improper reason," affirmed the general manager.

"Don't you think it likely that it was done by the same man who fixed a spring in order to play a business trick on you?" Nat queried.

Bill Joll started forward, his face purpling, his fist upraised.

"You young hound! If you mean to say that I forged a letter or 'fixed' a spring——" he began, tempestuously.

But Mr. Haslett stepped between them, pushing Joll back.

Then the general manager touched a bell, and a young man entered.

"Clark, just see that Joll doesn't molest the boy," commanded Mr. Haslett.

The clerk, who looked like a capable football player, took his stand in silence beside Joll.

"Furman," went on the general manager, "what reason have you for claiming that that spring was tampered with?"

"I overheard Joll talking it over with an accomplice. When Joll discovered that I was listening, he and his accomplice tried to injure me."

"A lie!" quivered the fat man.

"The accomplice was caught and locked up," Nat continued, coolly. "He went under the name of Scamp Hefers. A pal of Scamp's, known as Rags Abbott, got him out of the police station by a trick that same night. Then the two telephoned me in your name to meet you at a road-house. On the way I was caught by that pair, tied to a hand-car, and left in the path of the night express. By good luck the engineer saw me in time to slow down so that I wasn't killed. All this, Mr. Haslett, you can find out from the police at Creston."

"But where do I fit in, in this yarn?" demanded Joll, blusteringly.

"If we could prove where you fitted in," retorted Furman, "you'd be behind bars now. But you can easily find out about my mishaps, Mr. Haslett, and they came about through the fact that I was aware of Joll's trick. I would have written you about the trick, but of course that letter, forged, made me think it wouldn't be worth while. And so I put it off."

Haslett remained silent for some moments, eyeing the sulky Joll thoughtfully.

"This is all plausible enough, Joll," said the general manager, at last.

"Maybe it is, but a lie just the same," asserted the fat man.

"Mr. Haslett," continued Nat, "why did you go ahead and buy the land after receiving my telegram this afternoon?"

"Your telegram?" repeated Haslett. "I didn't see one from you to-day."

"But I sent one."

"It never reached me."

"Down at the depot I learned that it had been delivered here."

Haslett turned to his clerk.

"Clark, how many telegrams did you receive for me this afternoon?"

"Nine, I think, sir."

"Make sure."

The clerk glided from the room to consult his record at the desk by the gate.

Haslett stepped to his desk, picked up several yellowish sheets and counting them.

"Nine was right, sir," hailed Clark from the doorway. Then he came forward into the room.

"I have only eight here on my desk," muttered the general manager. "Clark, do you remember whether you handed each of the telegrams to me personally?"

"Eight I did, sir."

"And the other?"

"I laid on your desk while you were out of the room."

"Was any one else in the room at the time?"

"Mr. Joll was."

"And he was here all alone."

"Yes, sir, for a few moments after I left the room."

Haslett wheeled instantly upon Joll.

"Well, sir, have you anything to say?" demanded the general manager.

"I don't know anything about any telegram," rejoined the fat man.

But Clark, stepping suddenly forward, thrust one hand lightly down into one of Bill Joll's overcoat pockets.

He drew out a yellow envelope.

Joll made a dive for it, but the clerk brushed the fat man aside and handed the envelope to his employer.

"This telegram is from you Furman, and warns me and advises me to wait until you get here."

Joll was breathing hard as Mr. Haslett faced him sternly.

"My man, I don't like the looks of things!"

"You're just like me, then," uttered Joll, cheekily. "I don't like the looks of things, either. It looks as if this kid had gone to great pains to fix up his tricks against me."

"He certainly didn't steal that telegram," smiled Haslett, grimly.

"No; but he could have rigged it up and dropped it in my pocket," bluffed that fat man.

"Bosh, of course!" spoke Nat, impatiently. "The telegraph people will prove that they received and delivered that telegram here. Mr. Clark has accounted for its being on your desk, Mr. Haslett. Now, how could I have fixed anything up, beyond sending you that wire from Creston?"

"You couldn't, of course," admitted the general manager. "Joll, I feel bound to say that things begin to look worse and worse against you."

"Let 'em look, then. I'm not guilty!" cried the fellow, sullenly.

"I think," said Mr. Haslett, quietly, "that we'd better take a day or two more to consider this matter of the land sale, Mr. Joll."

"You can't!" cried the fellow, triumphantly.

Haslett did not answer, but instead of using his desk telephone, he went to a closed booth in a corner of the room.

While the door was shut and the general manager was

seen to be talking into the instrument, Joll took a step toward Nat.

"Back there!" warned Clark, growing suddenly threatening. "I have my orders, Mr. Joll. If you attempt to reach this young man I shall slam you down on the floor and sit on you until Mr. Haslett orders me to let you up."

Joll purpled in the face, but he looked athletic young Clark over and concluded to take the forcible hint.

"You're putting up all the dirty trouble you know how, ain't you?" snarled Joll at our hero.

But Nat would not allow himself to answer.

Folding his arms over his breast, he leaned with his back against a corner of the general manager's desk.

After a couple of minutes Mr. Haslett came out of the telephone booth.

He looked at Joll with the plainest disfavor.

"Mr. Joll, since you have declined to amend that deed to the land in such a way as to protect our interests in the matter, I have concluded to call the deal off."

"But you can't," blustered the fat man, confidently.

"Have you cashed the check yet—the check that I gave you in payment of the land?"

"No," the rascal admitted.

"Then I'm going to stop payment on the check."

"But you can't stop payment on a certified check!" cried Big Bill Joll, triumphantly.

"Can't?" smiled Mr. Haslett, sarcastically. "Well, I've just done it!"

Joll started, then an ugly grin came into his face.

"How can you stop any kind of a check, Mr. Haslett, after banking hours?" demanded the rogue.

"Why, I thought some of the bank's officers might be there yet," replied the general manager, coolly. "So I called up and found the president was there. I ordered payment stopped on that check which you hold."

"And the bank president told you that it couldn't be done."

"The bank president informed me," replied Mr. Haslett, slowly, "that it wasn't customary for banks to accept stop-orders on certified checks."

"Same thing!" blurted Joll.

"Not quite the same thing, in this case, my man. I warned the bank president that if he cashed that certified check I'd hold him responsible for the full amount of the money right up to the last court of appeal. Then the president weakened, and said he wouldn't cash the check if I sent him a written order against it at once."

"Well?" demanded Joll, hoarsely.

"My man, I'm going to write that note now."

Joll took a step forward, but Clark pushed him back and held him.

Mr. Haslett wrote rapidly with his own hand, touched a bell, and a clerk came in.

"Johnson, take this down to the president of our bank at once. Ask him to call me up on the 'phone and let me know that he has received this stop-order."

"Yes, sir."

Big Bill Joll's legs trembled under him as he saw that clerk depart.

"Things are all coming your way, ain't they, Mr. Haslett, and against the poor real estate agent?" cried Joll, half whiningly.

"Why, if I can be convinced that that spring is all right, after my own experts have made some searching tests right on the land, and if I am as well pleased in every other way, then, Mr. Joll, I imagine I shall apologize to you for what has happened this afternoon, and stand ready to make a new deal, on a better deed."

"I'll force the bank to cash that certified check," defied the fat man.

"To prove that I'm sure you can't do it, Joll, I'll hand you back your deed right now," retorted Mr. Haslett, passing over a bulky document.

Joll refusing to take it, the deed fell on the floor. At a sign from his employer Clark picked it up and dropped it in a waste-basket.

"Now, Joll," went on Mr. Haslett, with the air and tone of a man who is closing a matter, "you know the conditions on which you can get a fresh deal through."

"Furman, if Joll doesn't succeed in making good, or doesn't care to, then you see me about buying the Hemmenway tract, which you represent. Unless Joll's tract is as good as he originally led me to believe, then, my lad, I shall be very willing to consider the Hemmenway property. And now good afternoon to you both."

The general manager stepped forward, offering his hand to our hero, but he did not do as much for Joll, who headed for the door.

"It looks now, lad, as if you had told the full truth and nailed a sharper," whispered Haslett, as soon as the fat man had gone. "If you have done that for me then you have earned a greater gratitude than I can express to you."

Nat did not linger, but left the building soon after Joll had done so.

"Not such a bad afternoon's work," mused young Furman, as he stepped through the big outer gateway to the Limene works. "I can see my big, fat commission looking my way again."

As Nat turned into the road he gave a slight start.

"Hullo!" he grunted. "There's Bill Joll, and he looks as if he were waiting for me. Well, what if he is? I'm not afraid of a big, fat, overgrown fellow like him. I believe I could thump him easily if it became necessary."

So Nat walked steadily on, returning the other's sharp look.

"Think you've done something smart, do you?" demanded the fat man, as Nat was about to pass.

Our hero halted, looking at his man more closely than ever.

"I guess I've stopped the deal for you, Joll, if that's what you mean," came the cool answer.

"Yes, you did!" raged the other, shaking with passion. "D'you know what the owner was to pay me as commission for selling that tract of land?"

"Of course I don't."

"Thirty thousand dollars!"

Joll almost screamed the words.

"That was a very big and handsome commission," Nat replied, calmly.

"And I was 'most broke, and spent about every dollar I could get to put this deal through!" quivered the defeated one.

But Nat only replied:

"Bill Joll, I'm sorry for an honest man who slips and goes down. But I've got no sympathy to waste on a scoundrel who puts up a swindle all around, and then finds that dishonesty never pays!"

"Oh, I didn't expect your sympathy, none!" leered the rogue.

"Then, what?"

"All I want now, Nat Furman, is to get square!"

"How?"

"This way!"

Joll drew one hand swiftly from an overcoat pocket, aimed a revolver point-blank at the boy's chest, and fired.

With a yell, partly of fear, partly of pain, Nat Furman threw up his hands, then fell.

CHAPTER X.

JESS DOESN'T LIKE SOMETHING.

Nat lay there bleeding, silent.

For a few moments, now that his vengeance was glutted, Bill Joll stood there, the smoking weapon still in his hand.

Then the rogue came out of his trance.

"Nobody making a row," he muttered. "I guess nobody saw this, or heard the shot fired."

A high, board fence shut him off from the view of work people in the factory.

"Maybe I can get out of this all right," muttered Joll, suddenly. "I'll try it, anyway. If I can get as far as the depot, I'll know I'm all right. I can lose the revolver through a car window, or off a platform. They may arrest me at Creston, but what can they prove?"

Then Joll looked down at the white face of his victim.

The sight made him shudder.

"Ugh!" he muttered, then turned and fled.

It was fully twenty minutes afterward that a driver, coming out of the yard of the Limene Company, on a truck, caught sight of the figure of Nat Furman, lying there in the snow.

His yell brought Mr. Haslett, who, at that moment, was leaving the office building for the day.

He quickly ran up to where the teamster was standing over the boy.

"I think I can account for all this," cried the general manager. "Help me lift him on to your truck, Coggsell. Cover him with blankets, and don't drive roughly. We'll get this lad to a doctor's office, and then I'll hustle off to the police!"

Nat was lifted and driven away.

The physician found that our hero was not dead.

Evidently the assassin had meant to send his bullet through the heart.

The leaden missile had just escaped the heart, but had ploughed through a section of the left lung.

"Can the lad be pulled through?" queried Mr. Haslett.

"There's always a chance nowadays," replied the surgeon. "That's all I dare to say."

"Can you take care of him here?"

"No."

"Can you move him to my house?"

"Mr. Haslett, the best chance for this boy's life will be found at the Creston Hospital. There he may pull through. There are some clever men on the staff there."

"Creston? That's where the lad lives."

So Nat was moved over to Creston, attended by the physician.

In the darkness of night he entered one of the dimly lighted wards, after he had been examined in an operating room.

Out of his head, the lad neither knew nor cared where he was.

For days he hardly knew.

Then at last he came to his old mind, a wandering, wondering one, at first.

"Oh, you'll soon be all right, now," doctors and nurses assured him.

But the bullet still lay in his lung. The doctors knew not whether he could be saved, but they tried to cheer the boy up.

Nat, however, was so ill that he cared little whether he pulled through or not. He concerned himself little with his troubles, but lay there, much of the time under opiates.

At last one of the triumphs of modern, highly skillful surgery was attempted in his behalf.

The bullet was extracted by the surgeons. Then the doctors did their best to pull him through.

Every day Dock and others came to the hospital to inquire after him.

One day Dock was allowed to go to the cot-side and speak to his friend. Jess followed him.

Nat gave them both a smile, stretching out a thin hand in greeting.

"Joll did this, didn't he?" Dock whispered, after a while. Nat nodded.

"It's all right, then, old fellow. He's in jail. He was pinched that same night here in Creston. He denies knowing anything about it, but he's in jail, and there he'll stay for a while."

"You have been having nothing but hard luck," Jess murmured, when it came her turn to speak.

"Getting gold-bricks all the time," Nat whispered, with a smile. "I'll soon have a corner in that kind of junk."

"It's a long lane that has no turning, you know, Nat, old fellow," cheered Dock. "Your best and biggest luck will be on hand soon, and you'll forget the gold-bricks."

"And the lemons," whispered Nat, with a grin.

Soon there moved softly on the scene a very young and very pretty woman, who looked wonderfully sweet in her dainty nurse's uniform.

"You've stayed long enough, I think," announced the nurse. "Patient Furman can't have long talks for a little while yet."

The nurse seated herself in a chair by the head of the cot, resting a slim, cool hand on the lad's brow.

Nat looked up at her, with a pleased smile.

Jessie noted that much as she turned to go.

After that the young people came every afternoon, just a little while before dark.

On this second call the nurse hovered near all the time. During the last half of the visit the nurse held Nat's thin hand within her own.

At last she hinted the visitors away.

"That young nurse," explained Dock, as he and Jessie walked away from the hospital, "is Amy Creswell. Very pretty, sweet girl, isn't she?"

"I didn't notice," said Jessie, coldly.

"Take a good look at her the next time you see her, then," suggested Dock. "She's a splendid girl. I know her well. Just look her over the next time we go to the hospital."

"If I go again," Jess assented, carelessly.

Dock shot a swift, covert look at his companion.

Then, if he thought anything, he was wise enough not to speak.

Jess did go again, three days later.

In the meantime Dock did not mention that Nat had asked after her particularly.

On this next visit Jess was accompanied by Tib, as well as by Dock.

"Hullo, old fellow!" cried Nat, stretching out his hand to Tib. "I was wondering if you had forgotten me."

Then he talked much with Tib, while Jessie sat by, trying not to look bored.

But Jess got a good look at Amy Creswell, and made up her mind that she didn't wholly like her.

Jess said nothing then, but the first time she met Dock, in the absence of Tib, she began:

"I don't see that that young nurse is so very pretty."

"Don't you?" asked Dock, idly. "Well, I suppose men and women always look at beauty from different viewpoints."

"She's pretty forward, isn't she?" asked Jess.

"I never noticed it."

"She seems to hover right around Nat all the time."

"She's his nurse."

"Does a nurse have to hold a patient's hand?" questioned Jess.

"I don't know," Dock admitted. "But I suppose a wise nurse does anything she can to make her patient comfortable."

"Yes; Nat seems to like the hand-holding well enough," hinted Jess.

"Well, why wouldn't he?" demanded Dock, warmly.

"Have you stopped to think, Jess, what a lonely life the poor fellow has lived? He hasn't had many to care for him, and has hardly known what it was to have a woman pleasant with him. Jess, if he pulls through this siege, I can tell you that I surely mean to make him realize that he has some friends left on earth."

"He has had a good enough friend in you," protested Miss Crane. "But that nurse—do you think she really cares for him?"

"How on earth should I know?" asked Dock. "I hope so."

"Oh!"

"Nat would be a good deal happier if he had a few girls interested in him."

"A few?"

"Why, yes, nearly all of us fellows know a few nice girls, and knowing them makes life smoother for us, and makes it easier for us to keep straight."

"It seems to me," uttered Jess, "that this is just a hospital flirtation."

"Well," agreed Dock, "maybe that's all it is."

"But if Nat grows to care for her——"

"I don't see how he can help caring for her—Amy Creswell is so good to him."

"But if he grows to care for her, and then this—this Creswell girl only laughs at him——" stammered Jess.

"Let me tell you something, Jess," retorted Dock, warmly. "The girl who laughs at Nat Furman hasn't got as easy a road as she may think. Nat is one of the kind of fellows who'll do anything he sets out to do, if he is given time enough. When the time comes that Nat really falls in love, he'll win the girl the same as he'd do anything else he set out to do. And the girl would be glad to have him in the end. Don't you worry, dear girl."

Jess tossed her head, but was silent.

She did not go to the hospital again for four days, and then she permitted Tib to come along, too.

Nat treated her just as he had done from the first.

He seemed to like to see her, and was grateful for her thought in coming.

But Jess couldn't help noticing how often the lad's eyes wandered in the direction of Amy Creswell, wherever in the ward that faithful young nurse happened to be.

Slowly Nat began to mend, though he could not sit up, as he was not yet wholly out of danger.

"Dock," he urged one day, "I wish you would do something for me."

"You've only got to name it, then," Dock replied.

"Write Mr. Haslett for me, and ask him to let you know, for me, how the real estate matter stands."

"I didn't wait for you to ask me that," spoke up Dock. "What do you mean?"

"Why, I wrote him a fortnight ago."

"And his reply?"

"I didn't get one."

"That was strange."

"So I thought, so I went over on the railroad to see him."

"And——"

"They told me that Mr. Haslett was South for his health, and that their orders were not to give his address."

Nat heaved a great sigh.

"I've been worrying about that not a little," he admitted.

"Then, stop it," commanded Dock, authoritatively. "What good is worrying going to do?"

"Dock, you knew well enough that success in that matter would mean a big boost in life for me?"

"Of course, but if you don't get that boost you'll fix up some other boost for yourself. You're not one of the helpless kind."

"I feel like it, lying here," Nat groaned.

"Then stop it. You're going to sit up in a day or two, if you don't torment yourself sick again. Think how soon after that you'll be out and hustling, if you take care of yourself and don't fret. Why, we're getting things ready for you up at the house."

Nat brightened under that talk.

Not long after he was sitting up. Then, by and by, towards the middle of the fifth week after the shooting, Nat was taken to the Hayes home.

It was Dock who took him there in a closed carriage.

Soon after Nat had been made comfortable in his old seat by the grate, the bell rang.

Dock himself went to the door.

Nat heard voices and knew that Jess and Tib were paying a duty call.

Then the voices came nearer the door of the room in which Nat sat.

"Don't you tell Nat that—not to-night," warned the voice of young Hayes.

"Oh, I heard what Tib said, Dock," Nat called out, cheerily. "He brought the news that Joll has escaped from jail, and that Scamp and Rags are believed to have helped in the jail delivery."

To himself, despite his cheery look, Nat added:

"I ought to know, by this time, that that news means the red flag right in the middle of the track!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE VULTURES AND THEIR PREY.

"Say, it's a great day out, Nat!" cried Dock, entering the room early one afternoon.

"I've been looking out at the bright sunshine," replied Nat, wistfully.

"Well, cheer up, old chap. I've been down to the doctor's, and have leave to take you out for a spin in the cutter."

"Have you?" Nat cried, eagerly.

"Yes. Enjoy it?"

"Whoop!"

"The horse will be at the door in half an hour," Dock went on. "Now, we'll take it easy and get everything ready, so you won't have to rush at the last moment."

"Why, you all treat me like a sick kitten," grumbled the

boy. "I'll bet I could walk a couple of miles, if I was allowed to."

"That'll come in a day or two," proposed Dock. "It's a drive for this time."

Promptly on time Nat was in the cutter, Dock tucking him well in and then getting in beside him to drive.

It was a warmish winter day, the snow melting slowly.

But the sleighing was still good and keen.

Dock, who had taken a good animal from his father's stable, urged the animal into good speed.

"We'll go right through the town, and a little way out," proposed Dock.

"And look for Joll and his crowd?" smiled Nat.

"We've got two things in our favor, if we meet any of those people," smiled Dock, darkly. "In the first place, a horse that very few animals of any kind can overtake. In the second place—this!"

He opened an overcoat pocket sufficiently for Nat to peep down and see the butt of a revolver.

"But Joll and his crew are not in this part of the world, nowadays," declared Dock. "You can gamble that they didn't stop running until they got a long way from Creston. You can also gamble that they've kept their faces turned away from here ever since."

The speedy stepper took them out of the town and out upon the road that Nat had once trod on his way to the road house.

A cutter passed them, the occupants giving them a gleeful hail.

"Tib and Miss Crane, eh?" smiled Nat.

"Tib's with her a good deal," remarked Dock, carelessly.

"They make a fine-looking young couple," said Nat, honestly.

Dock shot a swift look at his companion, then whistled softly to himself.

"Whew! Once, not so very many moons ago, Nat gave every sign of being badly struck on Jess. That lemon did the trick, I guess!"

On out past the road-house they drove, and then through a stretch where the woods bordered the road or came up near it.

Dock flected the horse's back with the whip.

The animal spurted forward, at the same time throwing its tail over one of the reins.

After trying in vain to jerk that rein out from under the tail, Dock was obliged to stand up, lean forward, and lift the tail.

As he did so the animal shied at something.

Wrench! Dock flew headlong out of the cutter, striking on his forehead.

Nat gave a startled glance backward, and saw his friend lying very still on the snow.

"Must have struck his head against a piece of ice," throbbed Furman.

The horse was running away, too.

With a swoop Nat gathered up the reins just as they were slipping over the dasher.

Then, for the next few moments, he had all he could do to bring the runaway down to a stop.

This accomplished, Nat turned around and drove back, peering all the way for a sight of Dock coming toward him.

The stopping of the frightened horse had happened at least half a mile from where Dock had pitched out.

When Nat got close to the spot again he saw Dock lying just as he had fallen.

Carefully, Nat drove up.

There being no one else in sight, our hero's first care had to be to tie the horse to a tree at the roadside.

Then he hastened to Dock, who still lay unconscious.

"Can't you talk, old fellow?" quivered Nat, as he bent over.

There was no answer.

Nat felt at the pulse of his friend. That was still beating, and fairly well.

"Oh, if somebody would only come!" groaned the boy, looking about in both directions.

But that part of the road was bare of other vehicles than their own.

"I've got to try to bring the dear old fellow to," quivered Furman. "I'm afraid I could never lift this great, husky fellow into the sleigh. How can I bring him to?"

Nat bent over, lifting a handful of snow and chafing Dock's forehead.

Once there was a little sigh from the unconscious one.

"That's a mighty good sign!" cheered the youngster.

He fell to work with renewed vim, chafing Dock's forehead and wrists until his own fingers were numb from handling the cold stuff.

Up on a slope that overlooked the road a man came out from between the trees.

One good look this observer took. Then, with a start, he turned and hastened back into the woods.

Soon that solitary figure up on the slope was multiplied into three.

Like wild beasts they came forward, stealthily, over the snow that deadened the sound of their footfalls.

As they came closer, their hands working eagerly, restlessly, they would have made one think more of vultures watching their chance to swoop down upon their prey.

Nat, still busily engaged, and watching his chum's face all the while, caught no glimpse of these human vultures.

Nearer and nearer they crept, with infernal patience, secure as they were in the belief that Nat would continue to be thus occupied.

Then, suddenly, a swift hand shot out behind him and clutched him around the throat.

"Got ye, this time!" clicked Scamp.

Nat tried to fight, but what could he do, weak as he was?

"Gimme half!" grinned Rags.

"Hurry, both of you," quavered Bill Joll, who was the third of these vultures. "We don't want any interference, or any fluke this time."

Joll, in fact, was already in fair flight back to the rise of land from which he had first recognized our hero.

He gained the top of the slope ahead of his companions, who brought Nat between them.

Joll was anxiously scanning the road in both directions.

"I don't see any one coming yet—but hurry!" he called out.

Nat had ceased to fight, from realizing the sheer uselessness of it all.

"I don't know that I'd care so much, anyway," he groaned, "if it wasn't for poor, splendid old Dock lying there in the road so helpless!"

Joll watched his companions pass in under the safe, hiding shelter of the trees.

Then he followed after them, having once more and finally made sure that there were no other conscious human beings in sight.

An eighth of a mile into the woods stood an old shanty of a place of one story and even of one room.

Its windows were loosely boarded up. The door looked as if it might fall down at a touch.

Yet, in such a shelter, these three human beings had been living for days. They believed that they were safer from the police in some well-hidden place near the scene of their crimes.

Nat was so weak that Rags could hold him without trouble.

Scamp let go, throwing open the door.

Inside, the place was lighted by a lantern.

As soon as they had dragged the boy inside, Bill Joll followed, pulling the door to.

For a few moments the panting fat man looked the boy over, gloatingly.

"You didn't think old Bill Joll had so much stick-to-it-iveness, did ye?" chuckled the fugitive real estate man.

"I had always a high idea of Mr. Joll's ability to be a sincere rascal," mocked Nat.

The fat man made a mocking bow.

"But let me ask you a question," Nat went on.

"Of course, if it's a short one."

"What good do you expect to get out of this move?"

"What do I expect to get out of it?" growled Joll, his face becoming purple again. "Well, I hope to get square—that's about all."

"I reckon you can do that," Nat admitted.

"Look at the kid trying to make believe he ain't afraid," taunted Joll, looking at his companions.

"We'll attend to making him afraid," proposed Rags, amiably.

"Afraid?" remarked Nat. "Yes, I'm afraid, all right. Who wouldn't be, in such company?"

"You'll be more so in a little while," rejoined Joll.

"And a little while after that still more afraid, eh?" mocked Nat.

"No; a little while after that I reckon you'll be quiet," responded Joll, with a cold-bloodedness that made the boy shiver under his skin.

"What have you got against me, anyway," Nat broke forth, "that can make you feel willing to go to such lengths

to get square? If I had been defeated in business by some other man I'd grin and bear it. I've had all sorts of defeats—nothing else so far. And I've had some pretty mean tricks played on me, too. Yet I never found it necessary to hammer anybody lame, and I never wanted to take a life that I couldn't give back."

"Going to preach, are ye?" inquired Rags, composedly. "That'll be fine. A long time since I've heard any real preaching."

"Why can't you fellows be men?" Nat went on. "Isn't it as easy to be a man as to be a snake or a skunk?"

"Going to call names, are you?" quivered Bill Joll, the purple tint coming back into his fat face. "That's bad judgment under circumstances like these!"

"Why, surely you fellows don't think you are men, do you?" Nat challenged, directly, looking from one face to the others in turn. "I suppose you could be men, though, if you got some sense in you. But one can't be a man and a snake at the same time."

Rags looked as if the speech was making some impression on him.

He nodded his head, thoughtfully.

"Have you fellows any idea," Nat insisted, "that you can escape the law or better yourselves in any way by bringing more harm upon me?"

"We can ease our feelings a bit," declared Joll, gruffly.

"What kind of feelings are they that can be eased in such a way?" Nat pressed home, again looking at all three of the faces in turn. "I am not making any plea for myself. I can't stop your doing whatever you want to do to me. But I wish you fellows could get more of a notion about being manly."

"Say, that would be great," assented Rags, his face lighting up, and now Nat realized, with an inward shock, that this rogue had only been guying.

"You did me out of thirty thousand dollars," accused Big Bill Joll, wrathfully.

"No, I didn't," Nat retorted.

"You broke the deal, when it had all been fixed and I had the certified check in my pocketbook. Wasn't that doing me out of the money? 'Cause the owner had agreed that, if I got that price for his land, I was to have thirty thousand dollars as my own commission."

"I didn't do you out of it," Nat insisted. "You did yourself out, by putting up a crooked piece of business."

"If it hadn't been for you I'd have got the thing through," roared Joll. "So I'll leave it to my friends here if you didn't do me out of the money?"

"'Course he did," growled Scamp.

"Looks that way," murmured Rags, thoughtfully.

"It seems hard to appeal from such an intelligent jury," mocked Nat. "But still I tell you, Joll, if you had acted on the square, and had had anything like you pretended to have for sale you would have got your money."

"I'd have got it anyway, if it hadn't been for you!"

"You think you would, Joll, and you might really have had the money in your hands for a little while," Nat re-

torted. "But crooked money doesn't stay by a man, even if he gets it. You'd have lost the money in a little while, and would have been worse off than ever."

"I didn't get the money, and yet I couldn't be any worse off than I am now," quavered Joll. "I was hard up when I went into that deal. I saw failure staring me in the face, and I took the only chance I saw of getting enough together to look out for me in my old age. Now, what am I? What folks call a 'bum,' and the cops are after me at that."

"I tell you again," but Nat spoke gently, "that it was your own fault, Joll. You've got a chance before you yet. Why don't you and your friends here stop acting like snakes and skunks? Turn around and act more like men. You can get away from here. You can reach some other part of the country and act more like men. In time you can get so that you'll honestly like yourselves, and have some reason for it."

"And, just as we get to doing right, have the cops jump down on us and bring us back here to do our little bit of time!"

It was Rags who spoke, and Nat again suspected that the fellow was guying.

But Furman answered, honestly:

"As far as I'm concerned, I'll give you my word that I won't speak of having seen any one of you here. I won't do or say anything to make the police go more keenly after you."

"What do you say, gentlemen?" proposed Rags, solemnly.

"I move we do it," responded Scamp. "I move we get away from here to-night and travel by fast freight until we get a couple of thousand miles away. There we'll start in to lead a different sort of life. But——"

"But," took up Rags, "we ain't quite as sure as we'd like to be that this lad won't peach on us as soon as he finds himself safe again. So——"

He glanced at Scamp, who, nodding, stepped over to a cupboard in the wall.

"First of all, Furman," Joll announced, "before we start for that fine new life we'll make sure of your silence."

Out of the cupboard Scamp produced a rope. At one end of it there was a running noose.

"Just to keep you from gettin' restless with your hands," proposed Rags, slipping behind the boy and pinioning his arms.

Joll quickly tied Nat's wrists behind his back.

The boy did not struggle, nor did he cry out.

He knew well enough that both would be useless, so he gave all his thought to keeping his nerve to the last.

Scamp, rolling a barrel into the middle of the room, stood upon it to pass the rope over a hook in the ceiling.

Then, moving the barrel, he shoved a box directly under the noose.

"Stand the kid on the box," he directed, hoarsely.

"Sorry," murmured Rags, softly, as he lifted Nat to a standing position on the box, "but we have to do this, owin' to a lack of confidence that we feel in you."

Scamp, with an impatient growl, quickly slipped the noose over Nat's head. The rope was drawn as taut as possible, and the end then carried over to the wall and made fast.

"I'm afraid this is anything but a bluff!" Nat faltered, inwardly.

Yet, outwardly, he managed to keep his composure.

"Get your firearms out," muttered Joll. "We don't want to take the smallest chance of having this thing interefered with before its through. I know you two chaps will fight when you have your guns in your hands."

All three of them ranged about the boy, watching his marble-like face curiously. Their revolvers were in their hands.

"Kick the box!" commanded Bill Joll.

In a twinkling it was knocked from under our hero's feet.

The last act in the drama had come. His senses reeled. He choked, and forgot, as he swung at the end of the halter.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

In silence the three scoundrels watched their young victim, strangling to death.

Though they had the brute courage to plan this revenge, the sight of it working began to get on their nerves.

Yet here cowardice came into play.

Not one of the three had the courage to cut the dying boy down in the presence of his comrades in crime.

There was a noise.

All three started.

The door flew open.

Through it dashed Dock Hayes, his face ghastly white, but full of daring and purpose.

The knife in his hand flashed against the rope.

Nat's body would have fallen to the floor had not Dock, utterly ignoring these scoundrels for the moment, caught that weakened form and laid it softly on the floor.

"Get back out of this!" roared Big Bill Joll, thrusting his revolver in Dock's face. "We can take care of two as well as one!"

"You'd better take a look at the door," mocked Dock.

All three turned, then cowered.

Half a dozen men, looking unafraid, peered in through the doorway.

Rip! Tear! Crash!

The rotten boards were coming off from over the window casements.

All in a twinkling other men were staring in through the stripped windows.

"Why don't you fellows go ahead and shoot, before all these witnesses?" Dock mocked, as he bent over Nat, freeing his wrists, easing the halter and slipping it off.

"Get together, boys!" roared Joll, raising his revolver and aiming toward the doorway. "Follow me! We'll break out—and death to those who get in our way!"

He was almost frothing at the mouth.

But John Haslett, who was among the men in the doorway, replied, coolly:

"Joll, there isn't a man here who'll flinch before your muzzles. We all know that you simply don't dare to shoot. Why? Because many of us have weapons, even if we're not displaying them. You shoot one of us and we'll have you all three nailed and on trial for your lives! No; you don't dare do a thing before so many witnesses, who can send you to your deaths in legal fashion if you do. So—put your guns down on the floor!"

"You go to the——" began Joll, blusteringly.

"Put your guns down on the floor! Last call! If you don't it'll be too late to save yourselves!"

It was proof of the power of the law. These rascals, though they would have fought to the death, dared not defy the law in the presence of so many sure witnesses.

"I'm agreeable to the gentleman's witnesses," announced Rags, rather coolly, and laid his revolver down on the floor.

Scamp, with a growl, followed suit.

"You white-livered snakes!" frothed Bill Joll. "You yellow-streaked——"

"It's your turn to put your gun down, Joll, or take the consequences," ordered John Haslett, coolly, firmly.

Joll could have shot his enemy, but he did not—did not dare.

He bent, and his trembling hands let the gun drop to the floor.

Then, as suddenly, Bill Joll keeled over on the floor, actually frothing now, while his face grew purple indeed and his breath came short, fast, irregular.

But none paid any heed to him until Dock had brought his friend around.

Nat, braced by Dock's strong muscles, looked around and began to understand.

"Poor wretch!" muttered Furman, looking closely at Joll. "He's got what I always expected him to have, a stroke of apoplexy."

"Never mind him just now," coaxed Dock. "How do you feel, Nat, old fellow?" as he helped Furman up to his feet.

"A little weak, of course," smiled the boy, "but mighty thankful."

"Do you think good news would make you stronger?"

"If it was very good news," murmured the boy, wonderingly.

"Do you see Mr. Haslett standing there in the doorway?"

"Why, yes, of course. How do you do, Mr. Haslett?"

"Nat, just as soon as you're strong enough to attend to business, Mr. Haslett is willing to close the deal for the Hemmenway tract!"

"What's that?" quivered the boy, straightening up. "Strong? Why, I am as strong as a giant already! Whoop!"

There were constables in the party that Dock and Haslett had brought.

They now moved into the building and took charge of the three rogues.

Dock, in the meantime, picked up Nat in his strong arms and carried him all the way to the waiting cutter.

There were other vehicles there, including the cutter in which Mr. Haslett had come upon the scene.

"We'll go to your house, Hayes," suggested Mr. Haslett, as he stepped into his own cutter. "There we can fix the business up, and after that I guess your young friend will feel that he can take a little time to get well."

"Well?" muttered Nat, as the Haslett cutter glided on ahead. "With a good slice of my fortune made at the age of seventeen, I feel as well as I need to be."

By the next day the whole transaction of the sale of the Hemmenway tract to the Limene Company was finished.

Two hundred thousand dollars was the price paid for the land.

Under the law governing the straight commission of a real estate agent, one per cent. is the commission paid. But an owner may offer a larger and special commission, and this arrangement our hero had made with Aaron Hemmenway.

Hence Nat's commission, paid him through Mr. Carroll Hayes, acting as trustee, had amounted to ten thousand dollars.

On that same day Bill Joll died of apoplexy at the jail. Rags and Scamp, being made of healthier stuff, were reserved for the criminal courts, and are now serving their sentences.

Dock has since entered the firm with his father.

But Nat, when invited by two or three local real estate men to go into partnership with them, sent each a bright new lemon by way of answer.

Then, with a snug bank account, he rented his own suite of three offices on Main Street and hung out his own shingle as a real estate agent.

That was three years ago. To-day, by following the real estate game, faithfully, and learning more of it all the time, Nat has obtained a fortune that would satisfy most men.

He is still to be found at his offices in Creston, however.

One spring day, about two months after he opened his offices, he was standing at the street entrance, when he saw Jessie Crane coming toward him.

"You haven't seen my offices yet," Nat greeted her. "Wouldn't you like to take a peep in?"

Jessie gravely accepted the invitation.

The inspection wound up in our hero's private office. Nat placed a chair for her, then seated himself behind his desk.

"I saw by the paper this morning that Amy Creswell is to be married," Jess observed.

"Yes," Nat answered, calmly.

"To young Dr. Porter."

"Yes; she'll make him a noble wife."

Jess looked at the young business man, keenly.

"You don't appear to be suffering any," she remarked.

"Why should I be?" Nat wanted to know.

"I thought you were very fond of Amy Creswell."

"I was, and am. She's a sweet girl."

"But I thought——"

"You thought I was fond of her in a way that would make me jealous of any man she loved?"

"Yes, I—I thought so," Jess confessed.

"You didn't think rightly, then. Even at the hospital Amy told me of her engagement. "In fact, we used to talk a good deal about Dr. Porter while she sat beside my cot."

"I don't believe you'll ever care very much for any girl!"

"Very likely not," Nat assented. "I started to once, but I found it was a game that didn't run smoothly."

"What happened?"

"The girl sent me a comic valentine—a lemon!"

Jess flushed, turning almost scarlet.

After a few moments of embarrassed silence, she asked, faintly:

"What if that girl told you she was very sorry for a foolish prank?"

"I might walk with her to the nearest fruit stand and ask her to look over the fruit."

"I'm going!" announced Jess, rising briskly.

But Nat darted to the door, standing with his back against the door.

"No one ever leaves here until his business is transacted," declared the boy, sternly.

"Business?" echoed Jess.

"You were going to tell me something about a girl regretting that she wounded a heart by sending a lemon, weren't you?"

"Did it wound?" queried the girl, softly.

"Deeply!"

"Then I—I am so sorry, Nat!"

He passed his right arm around her waist, bent over and kissed her.

"You don't need to go just yet, do you, Jess?"

He led her back, placing her chair snugly beside his.

Tib Freeman went off to college. Like many another fellow who couldn't get the girl he wanted, he'll doubtless find another, one of these days.

THE END.

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